



Vitality Unlimited and Nevada's Pandemic Recovery

Barriers to Nevada's ability to address substance abuse and mental illness

Multiple factors have been barriers to Nevada's ability to support its citizens who suffer from addiction and mental illness; these have been amplified by the COVID public health crisis, its fallout, and its resurgence. Among these are:

- Historic underinvestment in substance abuse and mental health resulting in limited capacity (clinics, providers, funding) to bring suffering Nevadans to good health and the workforce.
- Provider shortages – to an extreme degree in rural Nevada.
- Stigma and isolation – many who need treatment will not access it due to stigma, and many, including youth, seniors, veterans, and the homeless, cannot access it due to lack of awareness of treatment available.
- Homelessness, housing instability, housing affordability, reliable transportation – all of these exacerbate addiction and mental illness; even when individuals are aware of their need for treatment, 'the rent eats first.'

Now these challenges have taken on another layer due to risk of exposure to and infection by the highly transmissible COVID and its variants.

Vitality Unlimited – a Homegrown Response

Founded in Elko in 1971, Vitality Unlimited, a nonprofit 501 (c)(3), has a 50 year history of stepping up to address Nevada's needs for substance abuse and behavioral health treatment and recovery. In pursuit of its mission to instill hope and restore wellness, Vitality works hard to provide the range of services and supports needed by Nevadans who suffer from addiction, mental health conditions, and/or co-occurring disorders to attain quality of life.

Today Vitality operates inpatient substance abuse treatment centers in Elko and Carson City and has been selected by the Federal and State governments to operate Certified Community Behavioral Health Centers (CCBHCs) in Elko, Carson City, Dayton, and Reno. In addition to the wrap around services their CCBHCs provide, Vitality also has transitional, senior, and veterans' housing programs.

Challenges Vitality Faces to Mission Accomplishment

Although Vitality has demonstrated unlimited perseverance over its 50 years of service, it consistently confronts a range of challenges that threaten its existence and constrain its ability to serve Nevadans. These were exacerbated by the pandemic and the lockdown, where billable client hours disappeared while fixed costs continued. Vitality's challenges to providing sustained, dignified, and respectful service to Nevadans include:



- Uncompensated care – Approximately 15% of Vitality’s clients are private pay, and often costs of housing, food and family demands prevent payment.
- Age and Cost of facilities – Client hours declined during the lockdown, while fixed costs continued. Vitality’s flagship is its residential addiction facility, Vitality Center, in Elko, which has antiquated ventilation, electrical, and culinary systems that are insufficient to fully protect clients from highly transmissible diseases; its CCBHC’s are in leased facilities where increased costs challenge Vitality’s cash flow.
- Cost of systems – Vitality pays more than \$50,000 per month for electronic health record, billing, and contract personnel systems – the same cost for profit clinics face, while Vitality serves primarily lower income Nevadans. Vitality has invested significantly in telehealth equipment to assure treatment continued through the pandemic; however, more is needed.
- Client access limitations – Many of Vitality’s clients face challenges in accessing Vitality’s clinics due to psychiatric and/or health conditions and lack of reliable transportation; these have been exacerbated by the pandemic.
- Provider shortages - even MORE so in rural Nevada.
- Homelessness, housing instability, and housing affordability are all barriers to recovery and entry to the workforce for Vitality’s clients.

Vitality’s Constraints Align with Every Nevadan Recovers Framework

The Federal response to the unprecedented and interwoven public health and economic crises our nation has suffered have presented an opportunity for Nevada’s cities, counties, and State government to step up and support key organizations, such as Vitality Unlimited, who are the backbone of the safety net in Nevada. Thoughtful investments of ARPA funds can allow these essential service providers to perform at a level that responds to the heightened demands for client safety and treatment sustainability the pandemic has awoken.

For example, in order for Vitality to provide its services safely and sustainably, with dignity and respect for its clients in treatment and recovery, it needs:

- Updated and efficient HVAC (e.g. with scrubbers) and electrical systems, and energy efficient windows and kitchen equipment at Vitality Center
- Increased capacity to provide telehealth
- Increased capacity to house clients in treatment
- Increased ability to do community outreach, partner and program development, and grants seeking and management
- Financial support/incentives for rural licensed providers and paraprofessionals
- Increased control over other major costs of doing business

Vitality Unlimited will access the Every Nevadan Recovers portal to make specific requests, and appreciates this opportunity to make Nevada’s leaders at the state and local levels aware of the impacts of the pandemic on Vitality’s ability to serve Nevadans in need of treatment and recovery support.