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No bridge over troubled waters for rehab clients



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2014

A car seat was seen inside the hastily abandoned Joelyn's Family Home on Long Island in October. The facility has closed because the bridge linking Long Island to the mainland was condemned last fall, and in the process many addicts are finding their options limited.



By Yvonne Abraham | GLOBE COLUMNIST APRIL 05, 2015

Imagine being so desperate to stay in rehab that you would deliberately relapse.

That's a choice some women are making at a Jamaica Plain treatment center. And a decrepit bridge is partly to blame.

When the city abruptly closed the bridge to Long Island last October, a bunch of city-run homeless and rehab programs shut down with it. So did some nonprofit facilities, but we've heard far less about their scramble to survive — or about the people whose lives depend on them.

Among them is Joelyn's Family Home. After detox and stabilization, addicts go to recovery homes like Joelyn's, which gradually reintroduce them to the community, helping them connect with therapists and find work.

In Boston, recovery beds were in criminally short supply to begin with. The bridge closing evaporated two-thirds of the beds in women-only recovery homes in a single afternoon.

Since poor women coming out of treatment programs now have even fewer places to go, they're staying in those intensive programs way longer than they should. At Women's Hope in JP, run by Victory Programs, which also ran Joelyn's, they're staying for as long as 100 days, even though they're supposed to move on after 28. And even then, some can't find spots in recovery homes.

“There are women who do not have any support system, no family, no nothing,” said Nikki Sheldon, program manager at Women's Hope. “They will literally go back out and use just to get back into detox.”

Addicts deliberately relapsing to keep services isn't new: The rehab system has long been woefully inadequate to their needs, forcing them to take desperate measures. But it is more common since the Long Island closing took 75 women's recovery beds offline.

Ponder, for a minute, how messed up that is. During an opiate abuse crisis — State Police investigated 217 fatal overdoses in the first three months of this year — we have women desperate to shake their addictions deliberately putting themselves in danger to stay in rehab.

“What is there left to do, when . . . we're told we have to leave here and there's nowhere else to go?” said Samantha Cabral, 24, who, in the five years since she started shooting heroin, has relapsed many times, sometimes deliberately. For Cabral, the prospect of going right back out into the world, where she knows she cannot succeed alone, is terrifying.

Instead, “we go out and use, and if we make it back, we can get back into detox and start all over again,” she said.

If they make it back.

Women's Hope is squeezed at both ends: It receives 60 requests for treatment beds a day, but because so few women are moving on, only a few open up each week.

It's a disaster. But not, it turns out, the kind an insurance company will cover. In its infinite wisdom, Philadelphia Insurance Cos. rejected Victory's claim, saying its abrupt closure because of the condemned bridge was not covered under its business interruption policy. Victory is still paying the mortgage on an unusable building, and insurance premiums (to another company, since the sweethearts at Philadelphia dropped the nonprofit).

Jonathan Scott, who heads Victory Programs, is searching for a new site for the women's recovery center in the crazy Boston market. After months without stepping in, the city has joined the battle, rounding up donations, and promising to help with renovations. There's no question Mayor Marty Walsh cares deeply about what is going on here. But the city's failure to maintain the bridge will cost Joelyn's and others millions of dollars. Walsh didn't let the bridge fall apart, but it's his problem now. And it calls for extraordinary measures, like personal appeals to banks and property owners.

There are lives at stake here. To Cabral, 32 days into her stay at Women's Hope, a recovery home seems the only route to survival.

"I don't want to be another dead junkie you add to the pile," she said.