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FEATURED

OnTrack, Oasis provide options for unsafely housed people waiting for drug treatment

By ERICK BENGEL Rogue Valley Times
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Kristen Johnson, executive director of Oasis Center of the Rogue Valley, from left, Kerri Hecox, Oasis medical director and founder, and Jillian Mahon, peer support/doula, meet Wednesday in a renovated apartment on the Oasis campus in Medford.

Jamie Lusch / Rogue Valley Times

People struggling with addiction who don't have a safe place to stay while they wait for a residential treatment bed to open up may soon have options.

Chat

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This week, OnTrack Rogue Valley and Oasis Center of the Rogue Valley are opening three newly renovated apartments, each of which can lodge up to two guests, on the Oasis campus near Hawthorne Park in Medford.

OnTrack will manage the dwellings, which Oasis plans to purchase. Priority will go to pregnant women who are either homeless or unsafely housed and on the waitlist for OnTrack's HOME (Mom's) Program for mothers with children 5 and younger.

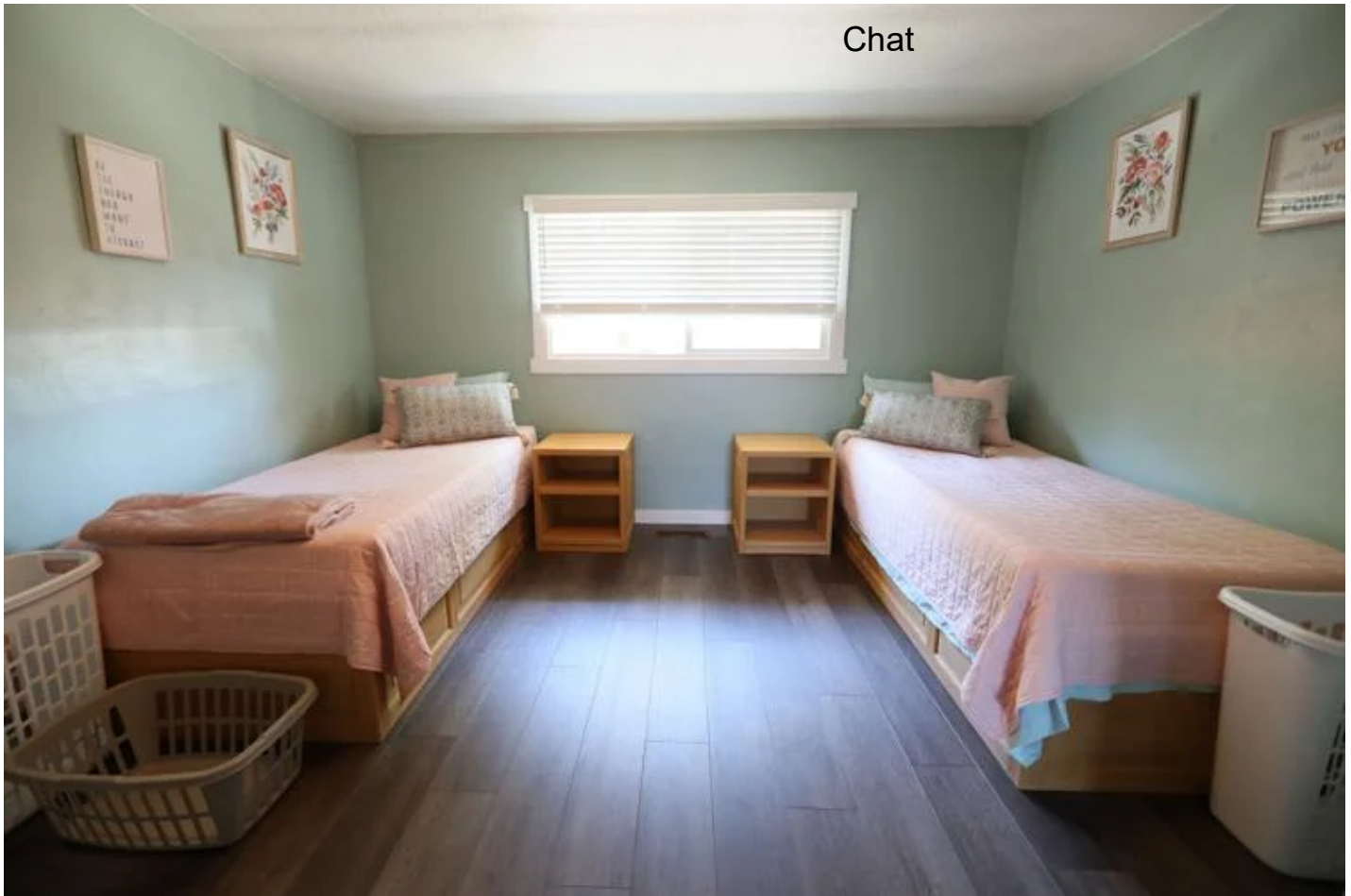
Dr. Kerri Hecox, medical director at OnTrack and Oasis, said the lodging will allow the agency to immediately stabilize high-risk pregnant women.

What often happens, Hecox said: "People will come in, they want help, and we say, 'We're getting you on the list for residential. It'll be hopefully less than two weeks or three weeks.' And then we don't see them again; they're kind of pulled back into their use. And then they resurface a couple months later, or they resurface when they're giving birth."

Now, if a pregnant woman walks into the center, Oasis can move her into a kind of holding place, allowing her to keep her prenatal appointments and prepare for residential treatment.

On Monday, a young woman in her third trimester and living out of her car came to Oasis for help. On Wednesday, she became the first tenant.

Chat



The Oasis Center of the Rogue Valley offers emergency lodging in Medford in three newly renovated apartments, each of which can lodge up to two guests.

Jamie Lusch / Rogue Valley Times

“Nobody is able to really engage in recovery if they don’t have a stable place to stay,” Hecox said.

In August, OnTrack will open a multiplex that can house 10 to 12 people within walking distance of Cobblestone Village, the future site of the agency’s Family Treatment Campus, south of Rogue Valley Mall. The units will lodge people on the waitlist for any residential treatment program in the state.

Pregnant women will get priority here, too, but others are also welcome.

“The emergency lodging beds will be prioritized based on individual risk factors,” said Sommer Wolcott, OnTrack's executive director.

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OnTrack and Oasis make it clear they are providing low-barrier emergency lodging — not housing. Some occupants will likely need to stay sheltered for an extended period, so the agencies have structured the project like a free hotel to avoid creating an expectation of permanent residency.

The lodging will only be available to people while they remain on the waitlist for a treatment bed — and when a bed becomes available, they have to take it.

“They just can’t stay there and say, ‘No, never mind, I don’t want to go into treatment,’” Wolcott said.

Guests cannot use drugs indoors or have visitors. They must regularly check in with their case manager, who will be on site regularly and connect them to resources.

“They don’t have to be participating in treatment while they’re waiting, but they do have to be engaged with us,” Wolcott said.

Project grants came from Measure 110, the controversial law passed by Oregon voters in 2020 that decriminalized user amounts of street drugs such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and fentanyl, and shifted money from punishment to treatment. To implement the measure, every county now has a Behavioral Health Resource Network composed of organizations that address drug and alcohol addiction. OnTrack and Oasis are two of 18 organizations in Jackson County’s network.

For its emergency lodging, Oasis will use about \$40,000 of a larger Measure 110 funding allocation to pay for OnTrack's oversight role.

Oasis also received \$150,000 from Jackson Care Connect to renovate the property and get the project off the ground, plus another \$45,000 in earlier funding from the coordinated care organization to connect with people who may be on the verge of getting treatment. Also pending is a \$410,000 Community Development Block Grant from the city of Medford to purchase the property.

OnTrack received \$789,472 in Measure 110 funding to purchase, renovate and set up the multiplex, plus \$41,800 for operational costs, Wolcott said in an email.

Additional Measure 110 funds, plus money from the city of Grants Pass, will help OnTrack establish emergency lodging in Josephine County, as well. The agency is working with architects on renovation plans for that project.

As OnTrack and Oasis researched possible projects that Measure 110 funding could be used for, the agencies saw that the state was focused on low-barrier services and supports for people who use drugs rather than on investments to expand residential treatment or detox options.

This means that, for would-be patients assessed to need residential treatment — that is, structured 24/7 care — the best OnTrack can do is offer them temporary lodging and connect them to outpatient services until they can get it.

But, Wolcott said, people have died while waiting for treatment. “And if we can provide safe housing for people in that circumstance, we should be able to save lives.”

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Reporter