

## Recovery homes reach out to Latinos

### Hispanic community lags behind others in seeking help for addiction

By Bonnie Miller Rubin, Tribune reporter

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Alberto Santana has been around alcohol and drugs since he was 7 years old, first introduced by his family.

Since then, the 23-year-old has been in and out of jail, hospitals and homelessness.

"I get an adrenaline rush out of doing bad things," he said.

This year, Santana came out of rehab with a resolve to stay clean and sober. If he returned to his old friends, he would relapse in no time, he believed. But he didn't feel he would "fit in" with an Anglo community, either.

Someone told him about Oxford House, a nationwide network of addiction recovery homes, which opened its first residences in **Illinois** specifically for Latinos — a population that has been difficult to reach with traditional treatment strategies. In the last 14 months, sites have opened in Joliet, North Aurora and Waukegan, where women are exclusively served.

Oxford House's higher-than-average success rate and low-cost approach may make it a model worth emulating — especially when states are broke and the skyrocketing cost of health care has become a hot-button issue, experts say.

Unlike typical recovery programs, the nonprofit's doesn't require deep pockets and gold-standard health insurance. Homes are on quiet city and suburban streets, indistinguishable from their neighbors. There are no paid clinicians. Recovering **addicts** govern and fund the home themselves and, unlike with usual interventions, can stay as long as they like.

**Oxford** House was founded 36 years ago in **Silver Spring**, Md., by Paul Molloy, a congressional attorney who knocked back two fifths of Canadian Club a day. Communal living, he discovered, was an effective tool against relapse. Today, about 10,000 people are living in more than 1,400 residences nationwide, including 75 in Illinois, making it the largest sober housing program in the country.

"It's all about the relationships," said Santana, who moved into the **Joliet** bungalow in March, after months of living in his car. "The people here become like your family."

As in any family, members make and enforce the rules, which are hammered out at a weekly meeting. The agenda can range from bill-paying to voting in new residents. In Joliet, for example, six men pay \$400 a month in rent, and even when someone comes up short, no one makes a fuss.

In fact, only one offense means immediate expulsion: using drugs or alcohol. Even then, a member can reapply after completing a treatment program.

"One person cannot be allowed to put everyone else at risk," explained Randy Ramirez, who handles outreach services for Oxford House. "We exist to support the group."

Ramirez, 37, understands the fragile nature of recovery. His story echoes many others': Dabbling in drugs in elementary school; by age 13, first stint in rehab; at 15, alcohol, marijuana and cocaine were a daily habit. A year later, his mother kicked him out of their Mount Prospect home, and when he was caught with a stolen car, she refused to pick him up from juvenile detention.

"It was one of the best things that ever happened to me," he said.

Still, it would be another 12 years before Ramirez would get off the jail/treatment/relapse treadmill for good.

With no money, job or driver's license, and "all my relationships fried," he was out of options, he said. "At that point, I had nowhere to go but up ... or die."

In 2001, he moved into Oxford House in Waukegan and thrived in an environment that offered structure, autonomy and camaraderie. And while his own family was assimilated, Ramirez watched as many Hispanics were turned away because of language and other obstacles.

In 2009, Leon Venable, another Oxford House alumnus, was reaching the same conclusion. He asked Ramirez — now with a college degree and a social worker's credentials — to open the first Latino-only home in the metropolitan area.

The federal government offers anyone who wants to start an Oxford House loans that must be paid once the house is furnished and occupied. The tab for state taxpayers is less than \$100,000 for salaries, according to Fran Bassett, of the state's Division of Alcoholism and **Substance Abuse**.

The program's formula could address the special needs of an array of recovering addicts: veterans, the hearing-impaired, gays. But the first priority was Latinos, who lag behind others in getting help, according to the federal Substance Abuse and **Mental Health** Services Administration. Only 7.7 percent of the 2.6 million Hispanic Americans with alcohol disorders received treatment, a 2009 study by the agency found; for the 1.1 million with drug problems, only 15.1 percent ever found their way to treatment or halfway houses.

Whether it's lack of awareness, lack of access or cultural barriers that keep Hispanics away was not addressed by **Washington**. But in Joliet, the men backed the findings.

"Families hide it ... or they just go to church and light a candle," said Santana. "Here, we talk about it."

Conversation was certainly present at a recent weekly meeting, presided over by Ramirez, who makes the 70-mile drive from his Waukegan home to Joliet.

In the Spartan living room, wreathed in cigarette smoke, a heated debate — mostly in Spanish — erupted over air-conditioning units in the bedrooms. Other items on the agenda included finances, lawn-cutting

and whether Santana's beloved pug, Petey, is allowed in the house or could be a violation of the lease — a discussion that agitated its owner.

"Use your wisdom, bro," Ramirez cautioned, as emotions escalated.

No matter how contentious the meeting, it always ends with the men encircled in prayer.

It's this peer support that makes the difference, explained Leonard Jason, a psychology professor and director of the Center for Community Research at **DePaul University**.

Jason has studied the network for 20 years. He followed a group of 150 addicts two years after leaving treatment, of whom half were assigned to Oxford Houses in the metropolitan area.

Of that group, about 70 percent remained clean compared with 35 percent for the non-Oxford House cohort. Additionally, the savings to taxpayers in a single year of residents holding jobs, paying rent and not using services such as emergency rooms came to \$8,173 per Oxford House member. The findings were published in 2006 in the American Journal of Public Health.

"If you can change who you hang around with ... it can make all the difference in the world," Jason said. "That's what a support network does."

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