



**Above** » Rural jails, including the Sanpete County lockup, are turning to community health workers to help detainees prepare and adjust to life after release. Cheryl Swapp, **inset**, on right, shares a hug with Shantel Clark on the day of her release from the jail. Clark's sweatshirt had just been pulled from a supply of clothing for people who are released at different times of year.

## 'She saved my life': Health worker helps fewer people return to jail

Rural jails like the one in Sanpete County are turning to community health workers to help the newly released succeed.

By LILLIAN MONGEAU HUGHES

**Manti** » Garrett Clark estimates he has spent about six years in the Sanpete County Jail, a plain concrete building perched on a dusty hill just outside this small, rural town where he grew up.

He blames his addiction. He started using in middle school, and by the time he was an adult he was addicted to meth and heroin. At various points, he's done time alongside his mom, his dad, his sister, and his younger brother.

"That's all I've known my whole life," said Clark, 31, in December.

Clark was at the jail to pick up his sister, who had just been released. The siblings think this time will be different. They are both sober. Shantel Clark, 33, finished earning her high school diploma during her four-month stay at the jail. They have a place to live where no one is using drugs.

And they have Cheryl Swapp, the county sheriff's new community health worker, on their side.

"She saved my life probably, for sure," Garrett Clark said.

Swapp meets with every person booked into the county jail soon after they arrive and helps them create a plan for the day they get out.

She makes sure everyone has a state ID card, a birth certificate, and a Social Security card so they can qualify for government benefits, apply to jobs, and get to treatment and probation appointments. She helps nearly everyone enroll in Medicaid and apply for housing benefits and food stamps. If they need medication to stay off drugs, she lines that up. If they need a place to stay, she finds them a bed.

Then Swapp coordinates with the jail captain to have people released directly to the treatment facility. Nobody leaves the jail without a ride and a drawstring backpack filled with items like toothpaste, a blanket, and a personalized list of job openings.

"A missing puzzle piece," Sgt. Gretchen Nunley, who runs educational and addiction recovery programming for the jail, called Swapp. Swapp also assesses the addiction history of everyone held by the county. More than half arrive at the jail addicted to something.

Nationally, 63% of people booked into local jails struggle with a substance use disorder — at least six times the rate of the general



**Above** » Garrett Clark, left, puts his arm around his sister, Shantel, minutes after she was released from the Sanpete County jail in rural Utah in December. Cheryl Swapp, second from right, helps smooth detainees' transition to the outside. Ryan Montag, right, has been helped by Swapp in the past. **Below** » Swapp, a community health worker, makes notes during meetings with new detainees at the Sanpete County Jail.



population, according to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The incidence of mental illness in jails is more than twice the rate in the general population, federal data shows. At least 4.9 million people are arrested and jailed every year, according to an analysis of 2017 data by the Prison Policy Initiative, a nonprofit organization that documents the harm of mass incarceration. Of those incarcerated, 25% are booked two or more times, the analysis found. And among those arrested twice, more than half had a substance use disorder and a quarter had a mental illness.

"We don't lock people up for being diabetic or epileptic," said David

Maehoney, a retired sheriff in Dane County, Wisconsin, who served as president of the National Sheriff's Association in 2020-21. "The question every community needs to ask is: 'Are we doing our responsibility to each other for locking people up for a diagnosed medical condition?'"

The idea that county sheriffs might owe it to society to offer medical and mental health treatment to people in their jails is part of a broader shift in thinking among law enforcement officials that Maehoney said he has observed during the past decade.

### 'CROSS OUR FINGERS'

"Don't we have a moral and

ethical responsibility as community members to address the reasons people are coming into the criminal justice system?" asked Maehoney, who has 41 years of experience in law enforcement.

Swapp previously worked as a teacher's aide for those she calls the "behavior kids" — children who had trouble self-regulating in class. She feels her work at the jail is a way to change things for the parents of those kids. And it appears to be working.

Since the Sanpete County Sheriff's Office hired Swapp last year, recidivism has dropped sharply. In the 18 months before she began her work, 599 of the people booked into Sanpete County Jail had been there before. In the 18 months after she started, that number dropped to 237.

In most places, people are released from county jails with no health care coverage, no job, nowhere to live, and no plan to stay off drugs or treat their mental illness. Research shows that people newly released from incarceration face a risk of overdose that is 10 times as high as that of the general public.

Swapp wasn't any different. "For seven to eight years of me being here, we'd just release people and cross our fingers," said Jared Hill, the clinical director for Sanpete County and a counselor at the jail.

Nunley, the programming sergeant, remembers watching people released from jail walk the mile to town with nothing but the clothes

they'd worn on the day they were arrested — it was known as the "walk of shame." Swapp hates that phrase. She said no one has made the trip on foot since she started in July 2022.

Swapp's work was initially funded by a grant from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, but it has proved so popular that commissioners in Sanpete County voted to use a portion of its opioid settlement money to cover the position in the future.

Swapp doesn't have formal medical or social work training. She is certified by the state of Utah as a community health worker, a job that has become more common nationwide. There were about 67,000 people working as community health workers in 2022, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

### 'I'M YOUR BIGGEST FAN'

Evidence is mounting that the model of training people to help their neighbors connect to government and health care services is sound, said Aditi Vasan, a senior fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics at the University of Pennsylvania who has reviewed the research on the relatively new role.

The day before Swapp coordinated Shantel Clark's release, she sat with Robert Draper, a man in his 50s with long white hair and bright blue eyes. Draper has been in and out of jail for decades. He was sober for a year and had been taking care of his ill mother. She kept getting worse. Then his daughter and her child came to help. It was all a little too much.

"I thought, if I can just go and get high, I can deal with this s---," said Draper. "But after you've been using for 40 years, it's kinda easy to slip back in."

He didn't blame his probation officer for throwing him back in jail when he tested positive for drugs, he said. But he thinks jail time is an overreaction to a relapse. Draper sent a note to Swapp through the jail staff asking to see her. He was hoping she could help him get out so he could be with his mom, who had just been sent to hospice. He had missed his father's death years ago because he was in jail at the time.

Swapp listened to Draper's story without interruptions or questions. Then she asked if she could run through her list with him so she would know what he needed.

"Do you have your Social Security card?"

"My card?" Draper shrugged. "I know my number."

"Your birth certificate, you have

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