



Drug and Alcohol Treatment Facilities

They Are Sometimes Concentrated in Residential Areas, as Allowed, but State Oversight Is Not Always Timely or Thorough

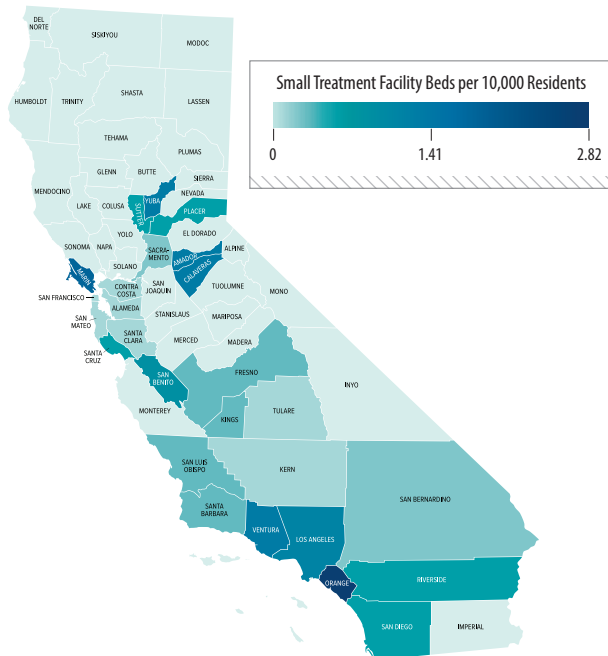
Background

The Department of Health Care Services (Health Care Services) licenses residential drug and alcohol recovery and treatment facilities (treatment facilities) that provide services, such as detoxification and counseling, for people with substance use disorder. To protect the health and safety of facility residents, Health Care Services inspects treatment facilities to ensure that they meet requirements in state law, and the department investigates complaints about facilities and treatment counselors. Our audit primarily focused on these treatment facilities, which are sometimes concentrated in certain residential areas of California. The requesters of this audit expressed concerns that facilities operating without proper licenses pose a safety risk and that Health Care Services' current practice of issuing separate licenses to facilities that essentially work in conjunction as a single operation may circumvent local regulations and state law.

Key Findings

- Southern California contains a greater concentration of treatment facilities serving six or fewer residents (small facilities) than other parts of the State. However, state law allows facilities to be located near each other and have the same legal owners.
 - » Because local authorities may use zoning requirements to more strictly regulate facilities serving more than six residents (large facilities), an operator may group small facilities in the same area to avoid certain zoning regulations and reduce operating costs.
 - » We identified two facility groupings in San Diego County and in Orange County, including one that advertised a group of small facilities as a campus.
 - » Health Care Services conducts inspections to ensure that facilities comply with license requirements and do not share residents or services among facilities.
- Health Care Services consistently reviewed the 26 license applications that we assessed, and the application process is generally the same for all facilities.
 - » However, of the 26 compliance inspections of operating facilities that we reviewed, the department conducted only half of them on time.
- Health Care Services also took longer than its target of 30 to 60 days to investigate complaints against treatment facilities. For instance, it took more than a year to complete 22 of the 60 investigations we reviewed.
 - » Additionally, Health Care Services did not always follow up on unlicensed facilities that it found were unlawfully advertising or providing services.

There Are Currently More Beds for Small Treatment Facilities Per 10,000 Residents in Orange County Than in Other Counties in California



Our Key Recommendations

- If the Legislature seeks to address concerns about overconcentration of treatment facilities in residential communities, it could potentially enact legislation to address the issue.
- Health Care Services should provide to its management information about the timeliness of compliance inspections, implement processes for notifying staff of upcoming compliance inspections, and fill its vacant positions.
- Health Care Services should implement guidelines that specify the length of time analysts should take to complete key steps in the investigation process.
- Health Care Services should develop and implement a follow-up procedure when it has substantiated allegations of an unlicensed facility providing services.