

SEMPERVIRENS PSYCHIATRIC HEALTH FACILITY

A Key Support System for Humboldt County

Released July 11th, 2025

SUMMARY

Mental illness has no bias; it doesn't discriminate, and it affects people of all ages, genders, and ethnicities. A mental health crisis continues to impact our nation, state, and county. The importance of mental health is recognized, but there are significant challenges. Issues like long wait times for services, inadequate support, lack of psychiatrists, and the stigma that still surrounds mental health are common themes. Humboldt County struggles with a lack of inpatient mental health facilities, as well as a lack of providers. Inadequate funding makes it difficult to recruit and retain staff, further affecting the adequate care for the patients. Emergency rooms and family physicians are stressed and inundated with people in mental health crises.

Despite these challenges, staff in the mental health care industry are trying to serve the people who need their help, and while they may agree that it's not enough, they still strive to do whatever they can in impossible situations. Sempervirens (SV) is an integral component of Humboldt County's mental health system because it is presently the only facility to serve acute cases, and it has just 16 beds.

SV provides a secure environment and arranges necessary treatment and support for its patients. The staff strives to offer the least restrictive environment through minimizing restraints and seclusion.

The Joint Conference Committee, which includes staff from SV, implements continuous reviews of policies and procedures and patient improvement at Sempervirens. Sempervirens collaborates with Behavioral Health's Cultural Responsive Committee, which focuses on inclusion, respect, equality, and equity for staff and patients, and their families. A Patient's Rights Advocate is also available to help patients if needed.

The Clark Complex, which houses Sempervirens and other organizations, was built in 1906 and was then Sequoia Hospital (later known as General Hospital). The building had undergone several expansions and remodels. Despite years of ongoing repairs to the physical facility, no amount of maintenance funding can address the building's deterioration. The 120-year-old building faces critical structural deficiencies that now threaten both SV's operational license and its continued existence.

Replacing rather than repairing SV would better meet the needs of community members with mental health care issues. In December of 2024, the County Department of Health and Human Services applied for and received a \$45 million state grant to relocate and build a new psychiatric facility. This new facility is critical to meeting the demand for better behavioral health services.

According to the local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Humboldt County is considered underserved in terms of psychiatric resources.¹ SV is currently understaffed for several positions. One of SV's biggest challenges is finding a Medical Director, given the growing nationwide shortage of (and enormous demand for) psychiatrists. Since staffing changes in 2016, there has not been one local psychiatrist on staff. The County's budget deficit² compromises staff hiring. Behavioral Health, which lies within the Department of Health and Human Services and oversees SV, faces a deficit of \$2.7 million, further compromising the opportunity to hire new staff. Even if SV were able to hire staff, the time for completing the County's hiring process often takes months, and by then, interested professionals have sought other positions.

BACKGROUND

SV is a 16-bed acute, short-term locked psychiatric health facility and hospital, licensed by the California State Department of Health Care Services and certified by the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare. SV is limited to adults 18 years of age and older. It is always at full capacity. The overall resident-to-staff ratio for direct service is about 6:1. Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities are required by the California Department of Health Care Services to maintain minimum direct care staff-to-resident ratios:³

- During daytime hours (7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.), at least one direct care staff member per four patients is required.
- During nighttime hours (10:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.), at least one direct care staff member per six patients is required.

Staff must be present, awake, and on duty throughout their shift to meet these minimum requirements.

The average stay of a typical patient is five to seven days, but is often greater. SV works with Crestwood, Willow Glen, and other long-term care facilities to address the needs of patients experiencing mental health issues.

SV operations are governed by the Joint Conference Committee (JCC) comprised of the Behavioral Health Director, Deputy Director of Behavioral Health, and SV Medical Director, as well as a Quality Improvement Coordinator, the Hospital Administrator, two members of the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors, and an Executive Secretary. Duties of the JCC include ensuring that the SV operations are in accordance with state and federal regulations and standards. They also address policies and procedures pertaining to SV, especially those affecting patient care, as well as review and approve medical staff credentialing and key staff appointments.

The Behavioral Health Cultural Responsiveness Committee provides client, family, and community-driven, culturally and linguistically responsive services to Humboldt County's diverse population. There is a focus on wellness, recovery, inclusion, respect, social justice,

equality, and equity in promoting client/family/community-driven and culturally responsive attitudes and practices.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury visited SV, where we met with staff who provided an overview of the SV program. We interviewed several additional professionals, both within and outside the SV staff. Research was conducted on the law and statutes related to mental health inpatient facilities and issues pertaining to professional staff recruitment and retention in Humboldt County.

DISCUSSION

SV is the only locked-inpatient psychiatric hospital within a 300-mile radius of Eureka. It is patient-centered and a place for healing, recovery, and gaining strength. The staff strives to offer the least restrictive environment by minimizing the use of restraints and seclusion. Activities are scheduled and posted every day for patients, overseen by two Activity Therapists, one of whom is certified. A small library is available, from which books may be borrowed and, on many occasions, allowed to be taken permanently. There is an enclosed outside area for patients, as well as activities such as dancing, yoga, arts and crafts, and music. There is also a chalkboard near the nurses' stations for patients to write and draw; this is viewed by staff as a valuable outlet for patients.

There is a patient-centered music program, and the SV staff has explored the use of music as a therapeutic tool. A study completed in 2021 focused on whether music-assisted relaxation could improve trauma-informed care and reduce the need for seclusion/restraint. The results were inconclusive, but it was interesting to note that during the time the study was conducted, admissions were up and seclusion and restraints were down. It was also noted that the study was a new way for the staff to understand and empathize with patients, "helping to build our understanding of trauma-informed care."⁴ The staff continues to use music as a patient relaxation and calming technique.

SV staff are committed to preparing patients for discharge beginning from the time each patient is admitted. Patients are encouraged to participate in their discharge planning, including their desired post-discharge care. Physicians and the patients' families are involved in this preparation. Upon entry, patients have an initial one-hour interview with a psychiatrist. Subsequent visits with a psychiatrist last 30 minutes.

All patients are provided with their rights, in writing, upon entry. They are also informed that certain rights may be temporarily denied or restricted when: 1) there is a risk of injury, 2) it would result in a serious infringement on the rights of others, or 3) there is a risk of serious injury to the facility as stated in both the Semperviren's Policy and Procedures Manual and the Patient Rights Handbook.

There is a Patients' Rights Advocate on staff as required by California Welfare and Institutions Code §5520.⁵ Patients' Rights Advocates must be given access to all patients and be permitted to investigate or resolve specific complaints regarding patients' rights. They also must be

allowed to interview all persons providing diagnostic or treatment services to patients. The Patients' Rights Advocate must have no clinical or administrative duties related to patients' mental health treatment. They assist patients in understanding and exercising their rights and also monitor the facility for compliance with laws.

There is considerable emphasis on safety, both for the patients and the staff. Examples include:

- regularly evaluating each patient's risk level for violence or self-harm
- training all staff to identify potential triggers and warning signs of escalating behavior in patients
- incorporating strategies to calm a patient down before a situation becomes serious
- using an environment free of items that could be used as weapons
- avoiding loose clothing that can be grabbed
- using non-ligature hardware such as continuous hinges and keyed knob-free doors that prevent people from harming themselves

As part of the Continuous Quality Improvement Program, key staff members oversee SV's general program of safety, patient well-being, and constant improvements of patient programs.

The facility has adequate fire alarms in place; fire extinguishers are checked regularly by the Fire Marshal. An environmental safety team periodically has an "Environmental Safety Walk Through" to proactively identify potential issues of concern in the facility.

A new cook has focused on meeting special patient dietary needs, including acquiring cookbooks to add cultural dishes, vegan, and other specialized diets.

The patients are paired in rooms with communal bathrooms. There are desks, chairs, closets, and bureaus for the storage of personal items. A Comfort or Quiet Room is available to provide a sanctuary from stress, and/or can be a place for persons to experience feelings within acceptable boundaries. SV has one room with a shower that is specifically ADA-compliant.

The physical facility has deteriorated past the point where it is worth investing money in its repair. The 120-year-old building has structural issues, and SV's license and operations are in peril. DHHS Executive Director Connie Beck recently told the Eureka City Council. "... no matter how much maintenance we do ... we don't meet [licensing] requirements anymore."

Because the SV physical facility is badly outdated and not adequate to handle the needs of patients in a fully effective fashion, the Department of Health and Human Services has applied for and received a \$45.3 million grant⁶ to build a new Psychiatric Health Facility in Humboldt County. The new building is expected to be completed by 2030.

There is a three-bed Crisis Stabilization Unit in a psychiatric emergency room, designed to prevent the need for inpatient hospitalization. This unit is not large enough to accommodate the number of patients brought in by law enforcement, which leads to the emergency rooms at the hospitals being overwhelmed. Lack of capacity is not the only problem; the roof leaks, making

the crisis unit unusable anytime it rains. The Crisis Stabilization Unit is meant for a short-term stay, and leaves staff scrambling to find a placement for their patients. There are few, if any, good places to send patients in crisis.

SV is a short-term health facility that has only 16 beds and is almost always at full capacity. Yet, SV houses some patients who are chronically ill and need a more permanent placement (e.g., Crestwood, or Willow Glen). These patients should be transferred in order to provide space for patients suffering more immediate and acute crises. The lack of adequate finances complicates this issue (this was also noted in the 2023-24 Civil Grand Jury Report). SV is designed and staffed as an acute mental health care facility. Crestwood is designed and staffed as a chronic mental health care facility. Facilities in Redding and Santa Rosa can sometimes relieve SV of some patients. A staff person pointed out that this problem has been greatly reduced since the Hyperion Crisis Residential Treatment Facility, which provides acute mental health care, opened in Humboldt County. The problem of overcrowding has been significantly reduced.

The medical staff is often under severe strain. SV is understaffed, with several unfilled positions, including the key one of a Behavioral Health Medical Director since January 22, 2024.⁷

SV does not have any psychiatrists on staff who are employees of Humboldt County or even reside in Humboldt County. All psychiatrists, including the Interim Medical Director, are contracted through Traditions Behavioral Health, and they all live outside of Humboldt County. This has been the case since 2015.

On-duty psychiatrists work 16-hour shifts each day (7 am to 11 pm) to cover general SV patients as well as those in the Crisis Stabilization Unit. They check in personally with every patient every day. These shifts often last seven days but can be as long as 10 days. On completing their shifts, the visiting psychiatrists leave Humboldt County.

It is very difficult to attract and hire qualified medical professionals to staff SV for several reasons. Chief among them is that, according to the American Association of Medical Colleges, there is a rapidly increasing, significant shortage of psychiatrists nationwide, and an “enormous” demand for mental health services.

“Already more than 150 million people live in federally designated mental health professional shortage areas. Within a few years the country will be short between 14,280 and 31,109 psychiatrists . . . In addition, the gap between need and access is wider among some populations, including those in rural areas. **In fact, more than half of U.S. counties lack a single psychiatrist.**” (emphasis added)⁸

Housing costs and availability play a crucial role in recruiting and retaining medical professionals. Home costs in Humboldt County are higher than the national median home cost, and housing is scarce.⁹ The average household income here is 63% of the California average.¹⁰ Lack of long-term housing options can deter potential employees from relocating to, or staying in, Humboldt County.

Most new physicians are burdened with a heavy debt from the cost of their education. Medical school debt alone, including undergraduate school, can be \$200,000 or more.¹¹ Physicians must be able to earn enough to pay for not only housing and living expenses, but also their monthly debt payments. New physicians are also often competing for very moderately priced housing. When psychiatrists can make as much as \$442,000¹² elsewhere in California, and only make an average of \$265,692 in Humboldt County, it is hard to attract them to move here.

This is further complicated because Behavioral Health faces a deficit of \$2.7 million. As a division of the county's Department of Health and Human Services, Behavioral Health oversees SV. This deficit further compromises the effort to secure the funding for the needed SV positions. Even if SV were able to hire staff, the County's hiring process often takes months.

The Grand Jury learned from several sources that the County often takes three to six months to complete the hiring process, and by that time, the interested professional applicants often have moved on and sought other positions. Completing the employment process within six weeks would allow the County to better compete with other employers. Private employers have the advantage in hiring because they have faster hiring processes, can offer higher wages and signing bonuses and may be located where housing is more abundant.

Solely using contracted, out-of-county, traveling psychiatrists to staff SV has its drawbacks. It may complicate their ability to do their job. As temporary non-county employee personnel, they are not fully integrated into the County processes and culture. One temporary staff member reported that they may be viewed merely as "placeholders." Their perspectives may not be as fully appreciated or taken as seriously as permanent staff. Some believe they are brought into discussions later than permanent County employees.

Patient satisfaction surveys are offered to patients while at SV. Of the 32 responses received in the first quarter of 2024-25, positive ratings ranged from 72% to 90%. Of the respondents who had a generally negative assessment of their SV experience, the most common reasons centered on the fact that the building is old and leaky. Some patients reported not trusting the care at SV and noted that they felt stigmatized and/or marginalized, and that they were treated impersonally. On occasion, some of the current patients are intimidating to incoming patients. There is a cold, unfriendly atmosphere in the building itself that is noted by some patients.

Conclusion

Sempervirens has some good points, including a strong focus on the well-being and recovery of its patients. SV also has a serious need for new facilities and more local professional staff in order to provide quality patient care.

FINDINGS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury finds that:

F1: Sempervirens is playing an important role for those experiencing acute mental health issues in Humboldt County, providing an important service to the patients and the broader community.

F2: There is considerable emphasis on the safety of patients and staff by minimizing injuries, self-harm, and potential liability. This enhances the trust and security in the patient-staff relationship.

F3: Patients are provided with extensive services to improve their mental health and prepare for discharge. Strong patient involvement helps ensure that the discharge process provides optimal patient success upon release.

F4: There are clear patients' rights that are provided in writing to all patients on intake. These give patients more confidence in their safety and security.

F5: There is a Patients' Rights Advocate available to assist patients in learning, understanding, and exercising their rights; the Advocate also monitors the facility to ensure that it complies with the law. These actions provide patients' safety and security.

F6: The Sempervirens facility is very old and in disrepair. The Crisis Stabilization Unit is unusable for significant periods of time when the roof leaks; this greatly compromises the use of Sempervirens facilities. **(R1)**

F7: The Sempervirens program is currently understaffed. SV needs to be fully staffed to meet the community's needs for acute mental health services while ensuring the well-being of patients and staff. **(R2, R3)**

F8: The County often takes three to six months to complete the hiring process, and by that time, the interested professional often has moved on and sought another position. This negatively impacts the recruitment of personnel to fill vacancies at Sempervirens. **(R3)**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

R1: The leaky roof be repaired as quickly as possible. The Board of Supervisors should direct the Public Works Department to complete roof repairs by September 30, 2025. **(F6)**

R2: The vacant positions for Sempervirens be filled as soon as possible. If the vacant positions are subject to the hiring freeze, the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors should exempt the positions from the freeze by no later than August 1, 2025. **(F7)**

R3: The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors streamline hiring procedures in order to complete all evaluations and hiring within six weeks. This is to be completed by December 31, 2025. **(F7, F8)**

RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, each entity or individual named below must respond to the enumerated Findings and Recommendations within specific statutory guidelines.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- The respondent agrees with the finding, or
- The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding; in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefore.

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action, or
- The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation or
- The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency, where applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of the publication of the Grand Jury report; or
- The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.

REQUIRED RESPONSE – WITHIN 90 DAYS

The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors
(All Findings, all Recommendations)

Invited Responses

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury also invites the following entities or individuals to respond.

The Department of Health and Human Services
(All Findings, all Recommendations)

Responses are to be sent to:

The Honorable Judge Kelly L. Neel
Humboldt County Superior Court
825 5th Street, Eureka, CA 95501

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury
PO Box 657, Eureka, CA 95502 A

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

NOTES

- ¹ Mental health understaffed nationwide
<https://www.counseling.org/publications/counseling-today-magazine/article-archive/article/legacy/a-closer-look-at-the-mental-health-provider-shortage#:~:text=Lack%20of%20>
- Underserved mental health in Humboldt
<https://www.kqed.org/news/11947033/in-humboldt-county-mental-health-resources-hard-to-come-by>
- ² Local staff/budget Issues
<https://kymkemp.com/2025/03/05/humboldt-struggling-to-meet-demand-for-mental-health-care/>
- ³ Staff to resident ratios
<https://www.dhcs.ca.gov/formsandpubs/Documents/Draft-PRTF-Interim-Regulations.pdf?>
- ⁴ Music Program: Sempervirens Findings Report 2020-21, California Department of Health Care Services, Medical Review Branch, The Use of Receptive Music as an Intervention to Enhance Trauma-Informed Care and Decrease the Use of Seclusion and Restraints
- ⁵ Other state requirements concerning Patients' Rights Advocates can be found in California Welfare and Institutions Code §5510-5550
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayexpandedbranch.xhtml?tocCode=WIC&division=5.&title=&part=1.&chapter=6.2.&article=

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- ⁶ Grant to build a new Sempervirens
<https://lostcoastoutpost.com/2025/may/13/county-government-announces-453-million-grant-buil/>
- ⁷ Lack of Medical Health Director
<https://www.governmentjobs.com/careers/humboldtcountyca/jobs/4351210/behavioral-health-medical-director-mc>
- ⁸ Psychiatrist shortage
<https://www.aamc.org/news/growing-psychiatrist-shortage-enormous-demand-mental-health-services>
- ⁹ Median home costs
<https://www.bestplaces.net/housing/country/california/humboldt>
- Housing is scarce
<https://www.harealtors.com/market-statistics/>
<https://chpc.net/resources/humboldt-county-housing-need-report-2025/>
<https://data.uticaod.com/real-estate-market-report/hotness/humboldt-county/county-06023/>
- ¹⁰ California household income
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/humboldtcountycalifornia/RHI525223> ;
<https://www.neilsberg.com/insights/california-median-household-income/>
- ¹¹ Medical school debt
https://www.bankrate.com/loans/student-loans/average-medical-school-debt/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- ¹² Psychiatrist salary in California
<https://www.indeed.com/career/psychiatrist/salaries/CA?utm>
- Psychiatrist salary in Humboldt County
<https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Psychiatrist-Salary-in-Eureka%2CCA?utm>