

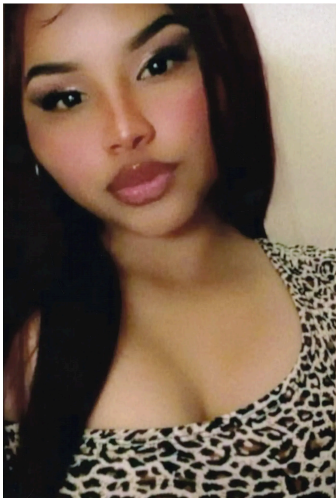
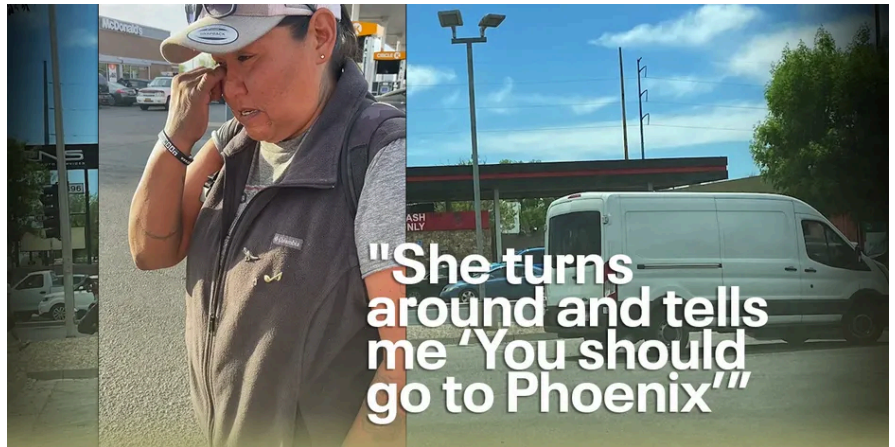
They Wanted to Get Sober. They Got a Nightmare Instead.

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[Original Article](#)

A few years ago, white vans started showing up around tribal reservations in the Southwest. They were looking for new business and would offer help to anyone who seemed homeless or drunk. They promised to give them a place to live, help them stop drinking, and improve their lives. Monica Antonio, a 21-year-old mom of three, decided to take them up on their offer. She wanted to stop

drinking for her kids. She lived on the San Carlos Apache Reservation in Arizona, where there weren't many places to get help for drug or alcohol problems. So, in January, a van took her 130 miles to a house in Phoenix where people could live while they tried to get sober. At first, Monica did well and even got a certificate for being sober for 30 days. But then her family and friends started to worry when they saw pictures she posted online of people drinking and using drugs in the house where she was supposed to be getting sober.



← Monica had fallen into a trap. Prosecutors and tribal leaders say it was one of the biggest scams in Arizona's history. Hundreds of rehab centers were giving bad or no treatment to thousands of Native Americans who needed help with addiction. This cost the state up to \$1 billion. Many people ended up homeless and still struggling with addiction. In the worst cases, some people died of overdoses in the houses where they were supposed to be getting help. Activists in Phoenix say they know of at least 40 Native Americans who died after being in these houses. Some died while they were still patients; some overdosed on the streets after running away or getting kicked out. Others ended up homeless in Phoenix and died from the heat or were hit by cars.

Attorney General Kris Mayes said this was one of the biggest failures of the Arizona government. She and Governor Katie Hobbs announced earlier this year that they would take action against the treatment centers. Mayes said the centers had been taking advantage of a program in Arizona that pays for health care for low-income tribal members. The centers set up companies with names like Healing Fountain, Happy Valley, or Angelic Behavioral Health. They registered with the state as counseling centers and residential facilities for behavioral health. They started charging the state a lot of money. One business even charged the state thousands of dollars to treat a 4-year-old for alcohol addiction. Another charged \$1.2 million to treat a parent and two

young children for a year. Similar scams have happened in Nevada, Georgia, and Texas, but on a smaller scale.

The amount of money Arizona paid to these programs through its Medicaid system increased a lot over the past four years, from \$53 million in 2019 to \$668 million last year. Officials don't know how much of that money was used for real treatment and how much was fraud. President Buu Nygren of the Navajo Nation said it was scary that this was happening in America. The Navajo Nation declared a public health emergency because of the fraud. State officials said the Medicaid fund for Native American treatment was like a big pool of money that was easy to steal from because it wasn't well regulated. They have since made their rules stricter and stopped the unlimited supply of money. But Reva Stewart, a Navajo activist, said some fraudulent homes are still operating and people are still being recruited. State officials are still investigating. Arizona has suspended more than 300 treatment businesses and charged more than 40 people with fraud.

The FBI and federal prosecutors are also investigating. In July, a woman from Mesa, Arizona, became one of the first people to be convicted. She pleaded guilty to federal charges of money laundering and wire fraud. Prosecutors say she owned two treatment companies that received \$22 million. According to court documents, she spent the money on luxury cars, homes in Las Vegas and Arizona, diamond necklaces, and designer bags.

Tribal leaders and former patients said the human cost of the scam was much worse and bigger than the financial loss. People who came from as far as Montana and the Dakotas described the sober-living providers in Arizona as careless operations where drugs and alcohol were easy to get, but real help was hard to find. Some houses were well kept while others only had mattresses and a few boxes of macaroni and cheese. Cydney Smith, a member of the San Carlos Apache Tribe who lived in a residential facility last year, said it was very empty and depressing. The door was broken, there was no bed, and people were coming in and doing drugs.

According to interviews with activists, former patients, and Arizona officials, the staff who ran the houses didn't do much to help people stay sober. In fact, in some cases, they encouraged their addiction. The white vans sometimes stopped at liquor stores on the way to Phoenix to give people alcohol. Some houses did regular drug tests and had zero tolerance for drug use. But others ignored it when people smoked meth and drank in their bedrooms, former residents said. State Senator Theresa Hatathlie, a Navajo citizen, said there were fights, drugs, and alcohol in these houses. There was no enforcement. The idea seemed to be to keep people drunk and using drugs. The longer they stayed, the more money the operators made. Several tribal members said they never spoke with any counselors or addiction experts. Instead, they were taken to group rehab sessions, where all they had to do was sign in and give their tribal identification numbers so the providers could start getting money from the state.

Often, patients decided to leave the houses or were kicked out when the treatment centers suddenly closed. This left them on the street, hundreds of miles away from their families with no money and no way to call home. Joryan Polk, a 22-year-old member of the San Carlos Apache Tribe, was so unhappy during his drug treatment program that he called his mother to say that no one was listening or helping, his mother said. He was found dead in his bedroom last January after overdosing on meth

and fentanyl. Residents at the home told a police officer that nobody had checked on Mr. Polk for about two days, according to a police report. The facility where he had been receiving care, Empire Wellness, was suspended in July for billing issues, according to state officials. State officials have not provided details about the investigation into the business; the facility's owner did not answer questions about the investigation.

Several families said they were desperate for answers or some accountability, but had not been able to find lawyers to file lawsuits or even reach the people behind the now-suspended companies that ran the treatment centers. Friends and relatives of Monica Antonio, the patient from the San Carlos Apache Reservation, said they were still trying to figure out what happened to her.

One night in late March, Monica and a friend left her sober-living home and drank at a small park in a gated community in southwest Phoenix, according to a police report. She was found lying by the front door, holding a can of alcohol, the report said. A staff member let Monica into the house, but did not call for medical help. She was found dead on her mattress the next morning. An autopsy found she had died of alcohol poisoning. Tessie Dillon, one of Monica's aunts, said the family rushed from the San Carlos reservation to Phoenix. She said the sober-living home smelled like alcohol, and that Monica's bedroom had nothing other than a thin mattress and her clothes piled in the closet.

Ms. Dillon said Monica's three children, who are now 8, 7, and 5 years old, still ask for their mother. She still has questions about why nobody checked on Monica the night she died, why she was simply put to bed. Officials for the business, which was suspended by the state, did not respond to a request for comment. An administrator from the treatment business did promise to pay Monica's \$5,000 funeral bill, Ms. Dillon said. "We sent them the invoice," she said. "Nothing."

Vernadell Johnson, grandmother of Monica Antonio, standing beside her grave in Bylas, Ariz →

