

Operation Rio Grande: Where are we two years later?

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SALT LAKE CITY (ABC4 News) – Two years after the launch of Operation Rio Grande, key figures in the project said tremendous strides have been made towards the opioid and drug problem in downtown Salt Lake City. However, some residents in surrounding areas expressed they still feel like the problem was pushed in their direction.

In a press conference Tuesday afternoon, Congressman Ben McAdams joined officials with Catholic Community Services, First Step House, Odyssey House, and Utah Support Advocates for Recovery Awareness to discuss the progress made in Operation Rio Grande's efforts to combat drug abuse.

Last year, when ABC4 News spoke to Odyssey House, Chief Operation Officer Christina Zidow said treatment centers were facing a challenge of bed capacity as new funding became available for patients.

At the time, Zidow said the waiting list at Odyssey House was around 220. But now, there's essentially no wait time.

"Before targeted adult Medicaid and Operation Rio Grande, treatment waitlists, especially for residential care were often six to 12 months long. But today, if I were walking back to my car, and someone stopped me and said, 'Hey. I need help. I'm ready for treatment,' I could bring them in this afternoon," said Zidow.

She reported that over the last two years, Odyssey House added 123 new residential beds and will be bringing on an additional 74 before the end of the year. They also increased their outpatient capacity by 130 percent, which she said, meant that they have served more than 3,000 individuals.

Additionally, Rep McAdams highlighted the operation's success in combating the city's drug abuse problem with the following points in his speech:

An additional \$100 million in combined state and federal Medicaid dollars allowed officials to pay providers to expand treatment opportunities and offer individuals a shot at getting clean and sober

Since November 1, 2017, more than 4,400 Utahns have enrolled in the Targeted Adult Medicaid Expansion program

More than 2,500 Salt Lake County individuals have accessed treatment services
Since December 2017, 500 new treatment beds were added
150 individuals enrolled in the new drug courts
Since mid-January, 517 clients were housed in sober living homes, where they can continue their outpatient treatment, get jobs, and receive support
Their Sober Living Program has seen an 81% success rate, which means patients are either still housed or achieved a positive exit
McAdams said he is a co-sponsor of H.R. 3820, the Effective Drug Control Strategy Act, a bipartisan bill to direct the Office of National Drug Control Policy to publish a list of drug control grant programs and establish a system to establish/review standards to address prevention and treatment.

An Operation Rio Grande success story

Amy Daeschel, who is now in recovery, shared the positive impact Operation Rio Grande has had on her life.

“I’m in long-term recovery and what that means to me is that I have not found it necessary to use a drink or a drug since August 23rd, 2017,” she said.

Her addiction started later in life at 38 years old after she established a career, family, and went to college. After a year and half of surgeries, she was prescribed multiple pain medications and developed a dependency for the drugs for years.

“Life had a beautiful way of bringing trauma into my world. My mother committed suicide. My ex-husband absconded with my children out-of-state when I had full custody. With the dependency, this is where it turned into an addiction,” said Daeschel.

Eventually, her addiction to pain medications shifted to heroin.

“In two months, I was down homeless in the streets of Rio Grande. I literally lived on these streets for two years in the snow, on a tarp, just every day with only the mindset of my next fix,” she said.

Daeschel said she was arrested seven times on misdemeanor charges and spent 267 days in jail. She waited more than a year on House of Hope’s waiting list without admittance for treatment.

“It was only because of Operation Rio Grande that I’m amongst you today. I was arrested on August 23, 2017. The time that I was detained until the time I entered treatment was only 37 days,” she said. “This program is so remarkable in the way that they implemented this. They brought the whole treatment team into the jails.”

Since then, she was offered a 9-month housing voucher and now, she said she's fully self-sufficient. Currently, she works with Utah Support Advocates for Recovery Awareness as a recovery coach.

"To walk into the hospital rooms, literally roll up my sleeves, show my scars, and say 'I know'...gives hope and understanding to the person that's recovering that we can and we do recover," said Daeschel.

Surrounding areas still feel like problems were pushed to their communities

Back in November when ABC4 News spoke to Chairman Nigel Swaby of the River District Chamber, he said businesses and residents along North Temple near 800 West saw a noticeable crime drop because of an increased effort on enforcement.

"When the police station was in the old Arctic Circle building, they reduced calls to the Gateway Inn from about 120 per month to about 20. You could see the difference," he said.

But Swaby said there's been a resurgence in crime on North Temple since Salt Lake City Police pulled out from their substation in the area.

"Now there's people there day and night, doing drugs, prostitution, all the kinds of things you don't want to see in your neighborhood. Last week, there was a murder. That's the fourth one in two years," he said. "There are two major spots that have re-flared up on the west side of Salt Lake, by where I live on North Temple, Gateway Inn, as well as Madsen Park."

Currently, Swaby said community leaders are communicating with city and county officials about bringing back an established police presence in the area.

"Everyone's really frustrated because we had something that was working. It was the police presence and the nuisance ordinance enforcement to the owner of the Gateway Inn motel," he said.

Despite their frustrations, Swaby acknowledges Operation Rio Grande's efforts.

"I'm glad it happened. I'm glad there's a focus, funding, and a spotlight on this issue because it's something that Salt Lake City has the opportunity to lead the way in," he said. "I remember driving down 5th West right over here and there were so many people camped out on the street, it almost looked like a hurricane had happened."

Back in October, the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah released a scathing report arguing officials with Operation Rio Grande 'improperly conflate issues of homelessness and crime' despite its success in decreasing crime stats in the area.

Salt Lake County Mayor Jenny Wilson reassures community members will see a more noticeable impact once the three new homeless shelters are open, which are behind schedule.

“It’ll be really interesting a year from now to be able to gauge the operation’s impact. We’ll be able to say, ‘Look, we need additional resources here or there.’ The opening of the shelters in the upcoming year are critical for our overall success,” she said.