

Sereno Ridge Recovery's owners (and their team) have had a rough year, in part due to the complex and convoluted CON laws in Alabama. Dr. Nancy White, board-certified in addiction and family medicine, long dreamed of opening a detox and residential addiction treatment center of her own, one that was more discreet, more comfortable and more intimate than the other facilities in the state (most of which are owned by a single organization).

She and her husband, Andrew White, purchased a remarkable property, 291 Valley Cruise Lane, Arab AL 35016, in March 2020, along with their partners, a psychiatrist and his wife. It's a gorgeous and expansive alpine lodge with 16,500 sq. ft. of finished space (5,000 sq. feet unfinished in lower level). It would have 16 beds and be a luxurious and intimate alternative to the facilities currently available within the state.

I left my job of nearly 11 years as a fundraiser/development professional at a highly-touted biotech research institute in August 2020 to become part of what would become Sereno Ridge Recovery. I joined as Director of Marketing and Business Development with the understanding that we would be a full clinical detox and addiction treatment center; we were just waiting for Alabama Department of Mental Health to approve our policies and procedures. I personally got sober on June 21, 2002 and was excited on a personal and professional level to help build this remarkable program and facility.

Well, as many things related to the government, that would take a long time. I was promoting Sereno Ridge Recovery, posting information on the Web. And it was frustrating because we were waiting, waiting, and waiting. We even had a great AL.com story published about the services we'd offer, the people we could help, and what an excellent new treatment option it could be not only in Alabama, but for the southeast. It could even become a destination treatment location for folks from all over the US.

Unfortunately, in the fall (maybe Oct.) we got an email forwarded from the State Health Planning & Development Agency that originated with Bradford's attorneys. It noted that Sereno Ridge Recovery needed a CON to open and they were afraid of folks trying to "fly in under the radar." Obviously, I had no working knowledge of CONs. I was brought on board to market and build a pipeline. The entire team was crushed.

Of course, Bradford had every right and reason to initiate that petition for a declaratory ruling. The law states you need a CON to operate a clinical residential treatment center and detox, and we didn't have one. The Whites immediately slammed on the brakes and agreed that we could not open as clinical detox and medical treatment facility without a CON. They tried to explain this to Bradford's attorneys through ours (Jennifer Clark, Bradley Arandt) and avoid the CON Review Board meeting altogether, but to no avail. The legal fees were already climbing.

I think everyone agrees that missing the CON law was as it pertained to treatment/detox was a big mistake and oversight on the part of Sereno Ridge Recovery. Dr. White asked the wrong agency. She was so excited about this place and was anxious to get it up-and-running. In

retrospect, we have all learned that she should have had a CON attorney ask those critical questions. They would have known whom and how to ask. But as they say, “You can’t turn back time.”

So the meeting happened and the board explained what was going on and the chairman, Dr. Swaid Swaid, was ready to have the board vote. But then one of the members said he wanted to hear from the other party, Sereno Ridge Recovery. Ms. Clark explained the Whites’ predicament and how SRR wasn’t going to open as a clinical facility and would not be moving forward with a residential addiction treatment center without a CON.

But they had a staff to pay, part of a mortgage and small business loan to pay, and an expansive lodge to heat. So they explored other options and settled on, with the blessing of their CON attorney, a non-clinical, non-medical 12-step immersion program.

I then started marketing a 12-step immersion program, in which medically stable “guests” would come stay with us for 30, 60, or 90 days. Our peer support specialists would walk them through the steps, guiding them through the “Big Book” diligently and thoroughly. We would take them to 12-step recovery meetings and bring meetings into the facility. All good.

Until we got word of another petition filed by Bradford. Sereno Ridge Recovery was losing money every day it couldn’t open, but the Whites were advised to get through that next meeting before welcoming their first “guest.” **We were in a global pandemic and overdose rates surged and relapses spiked, along with alcohol sales. In-person meetings were replaced by virtual support, which don’t help to nearly the same degree.** I sent out press releases explaining the complexities of the law and how wrong it was that we couldn’t simply open and begin helping people.

We got to our part and the documents shared explained that we were opening as non-clinical, non-medical 12-step immersion program, to which the dominant organization’s attorney’s basically said, “Well, how do we know that’s what they’re going to do?” They shared the article (written/posted in August) and other postings about the clinical treatment center (you can’t remove everything the great worldwide web). Dr. White was questioned for being a physician and running the facility (she would be the executive director, not the medical director) and also questioned for charging much more compared to similar facilities.

That in itself wasn’t a fair comparison. You see, there are sober living homes where people get jobs, work and are responsible for their own meals, etc. Then there are 12-step intensive immersion programs, which charge more and work with them daily on their recovery, and ours is a luxurious lodge with chef, indoor heated pool, awesome workout room and other amenities, justifying the higher cost. But they all fall under “sober living residences.”

Two CON Review board members voted in our favor (against Bradford’s second petition for a declaratory ruling against SRR), with one adding (paraphrasing), They should be able to charge whatever they want. It’s their business.” Five voted in favor of the declaratory ruling, putting it

on record what we already knew: Sereno Ridge Recovery needs a CON to operate as a clinical addiction treatment center.

The Whites considered pursuing a CON through the traditional process but were told it would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees, without guarantee that they'd actually get the beds at the end of the process.

I've met people who had considered opening treatment programs in Alabama, but they learned about Alabama's complex CON laws and opened their businesses elsewhere. I've met some of the greatest people in this industry, most, like me, are in recovery themselves and want to help other people begin a new life, free from drugs and/or alcohol. But CON laws sure make it difficult to do so.