



## **Tipsheet: How to investigate work-based rehabs**

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**1. To see our repository of local tips, please [join the network](#).**

**2. Zero in on the rehab you want to investigate.**

We'll be providing you with our list of potential rehabs to investigate.

But maybe there isn't one in your area. Or maybe you want to unearth more.

To find programs used by courts, reach out to prosecutors, defense attorneys and officials in the court system. For us, these initial conversations began with context. There is a shortage of affordable treatment in the United States, including lengthy wait lists at publicly funded treatment programs. We wanted to know where courts were sending indigent defendants for treatment.

Keep in mind they may have positive views of these types of programs, as many believe they are better alternatives to prison. It's a legitimate perspective, so hear them out.

Programs with this business model often describe themselves as "free," "self-supporting," long-term and residential. They are often nonprofits, faith-based and eager to note that they are not dependent on state or federal funds. They may describe themselves as recovery programs, recovery centers or therapeutic communities with vocational or job-training programs. And of course, some of them are telling the truth.

Social workers also are good sources of information. Find social workers at hospitals, detox facilities or any agency that typically refers low-income drug users to outside rehab programs. They will be very familiar with any program that is offering free, long-term services. They may have heard complaints about certain programs over the years, and can offer additional leads.

**3. Look up online reviews about the program.**

Reviews on Facebook, Google, Yelp, YellowPages and Topix can provide you with tons of sources and leads when you're investigating these rehab programs. People often share their experiences,

including what they did in the program and their work responsibilities.

You should send friend requests on Facebook and message everyone you can who wrote a review – even those who wrote positive reviews. (Always keep your privacy and security in mind when doing this. Facebook's [safety tips](#) are quite useful.) They are often close to key employees and administrators, giving them the greatest insight into the inner workings of the program. Sometimes participants are forced to leave positive reviews by program administrators. Others later had a change of heart.

People who left positive online reviews were some of our most valuable sources.

#### **4. Be patient with former rehab participants.**

People struggling with addiction are used to having their complaints dismissed or ignored. They may live unstable lives, making them difficult to track down or reach by phone. Their memories may be unreliable. They may be scared to talk. Gaining their trust can take time.

We spent months tracking down more than 60 former participants for our latest story. The more people you interview, the better. It will allow you to verify each participant's claims and describe the basics of the program, including abuses, with authority.

The programs may try to discredit your sources by pointing to their addiction or criminal records. The more participants you have, the more confidence you will have in what you have learned.

#### **5. Ask the right questions.**

Current and former participants are going to be your best sources of information. You should ask some key questions:

How did they wind up in the program? Did a judge order them to complete the rehab program? Did they face consequences if they left the program early?

How much, if anything, does the program cost?

Where did they work? What was their job role? How many hours each week did they work? Did they get to keep any of their pay? How much?

What kind of addiction treatment did they get?

What happened if they got hurt on the job?

## **6. File public records requests asking for complaints, inspections and investigations from the state agency that regulates drug and alcohol rehab programs.**

In most states, the state department of health and human services is responsible for monitoring drug rehab centers. Call the agency or check online to see if the program you're interested in is required to be licensed and, if so, file a public records request for all complaints, inspections and monitoring reports of that program for as long as the program existed.

Even if the program isn't licensed, you should still request documents. When we wrote about an unlicensed rehab program in North Carolina, we obtained key documents detailing complaints and abuses at the rehab from the state agency that licenses rehab programs. These records showed the state had known about some of the abuses for years.

## **7. Look up any claims or workers' compensation lawsuits filed against the rehab program.**

Digging into a rehab's workers' comp history can lead to new investigative angles and new leads for tracking down participants.

Call your state's insurance department, workers' compensation commission or workers' compensation court and ask whether there have been any claims or cases filed against the rehab program. Request them. By doing so, you'll get the names of people who went through the rehab and were injured on the job, along with the details of their injury.

This is how we found the main character for our story in Oklahoma about a rehab that put participants to work for free at chicken plants. We also found this rehab was keeping its clients' workers' compensation checks when they got hurt, which is illegal.

## **8. Background the directors and board members of the rehab center.**

We found that most of these work-based rehab centers are nonprofits. You can find the names of the directors and key employees by checking out the rehab's Form 990 nonprofit filings on [Guidestar](#) or on [ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer](#).

Background the directors of the rehabs. Type their names into Google and LexisNexis, and scour old newspaper clippings. Where do they work? What businesses or other nonprofits are they affiliated with? You can look up some of this information in your state's secretary of state business filing database. You can also search for the directors' names and any of their associated companies in court databases.

For our story about Christian Alcoholics & Addicts in Recovery, we looked up the nonprofit's 990s and found the names of the CEO, Janet Wilkerson, and other top administrators. When we searched Wilkerson's name in Google and Nexis, we found a host of articles featuring Wilkerson as the spokeswoman for Simmons Foods and other poultry companies. We then searched for lawsuits filed against Simmons and confirmed that Wilkerson had been a human resources executive for another poultry company. Later, a lawsuit against Wilkerson and a private partnership she established revealed key details about CAAIR's origins and ties to the poultry industry.

## **9. Find out if the drug rehab program is used by the courts.**

Courts and probation officers can be another valuable source of information on these rehab programs. You should ask local courts for data on how many people are sent to the rehab that interests you. Also ask courts and probation offices if they have received any complaints about these programs or conducted investigations.

In North Carolina, probation officials provided us detailed information and records about abuses in the rehab program we wrote about.

There are important reasons to care about whether or not participants are ordered into a program by the courts. Many states have formal – or informal – guidelines that specify that courts can only send offenders struggling with addiction to licensed drug rehab programs for treatment. But we found that many courts still use unlicensed drug rehab programs, sometimes in violation of the law.

Other constitutional issues also come into play. Are participants given a choice of whether or not to attend a religious program? Have participants been convicted of a crime, or is this a pre-trial diversion program? Legal experts told us that forcing participants to work for free when they haven't been convicted of crimes may be a violation of the 13th Amendment ban on slavery and involuntary servitude.

## **10. Talk to labor experts about what you found.**

After gathering details about how the rehab's contract works and how participants are paid, consult a labor expert to find out if it's legal.

Many labor experts told us that if rehab workers aren't receiving at least minimum wage and overtime, it may be a violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act.