

ADDICTION TREATMENT



People congregate outside a methadone clinic in Santa Ana in 2024. The methadone clinic system has changed little since the 1970s; at the same time, opioids have grown terrifyingly stronger, addiction has become epidemic and overdose deaths have skyrocketed across the country. PHOTOS BY MINDY SCHAUER — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Public payments, private profits: A half-century of methadone in America



Teri Sforza
COLUMNIST

They must be observed taking their daily medicine, at least in the beginning.

The clinician often wears a white lab coat and works behind protective glass. She'll pour a dose into a small plastic cup — it's often reddish and clear, like cold medicine — then pass it through a low opening. The patient, who may be fidgety or testy or dangerously late for work, may throw it back with a resentful snap, as if it were a shot of cheap whiskey. It is appallingly bitter, often masked with an even more vile fruit flavoring.

The clinician watches all of this to be sure the stuff is actually swallowed. Methadone must not be "diverted" (that's government-speak for "stolen") and resold as a recreational drug on the



People arrive in the early morning to receive methadone treatment at a clinic in Stanton on July 29. America's methadone clinics are strictly regulated and federally sanctioned. Many are supported by for-profit entities.

black market.

This almost morbid fear of diversion — far more than any desire to help patients — has been a big part of America's methadone clinic system, critics say. For more than half a century, that fear also has handed clinics an exclusive, nearly unbreakable iron grip on what remains a gold standard treatment for opioid addiction.

Methadone clinics are

strictly regulated, federally sanctioned and primarily owned by for-profit corporate chains. Many are backed by private equity or publicly traded healthcare companies, which has attracted the ire of lawmakers.

Still, the system has changed little over the decades, even as opioids grew terrifyingly stronger, addiction became epidemic and overdose deaths skyrocketed.

METHADONE IN AMERICA

This is the first installment of a four-part series.

Part 1: Can one medicine be a Nixon-era relic, an effective sobriety aid and a controversial profit center? Say hello, again, to methadone. **Part 2:** "Liberate Methadone!" A drug inspires patients to write a manifesto. **Part 3:** Reform? Clinic operators hire Danny Trejo to push "Program, Not a Pill." **Part 4:** Did methadone rules kill Sherry Lynn James? New ideas are back on the table, and legislators say they're meeting the industry halfway.

"Coming off opioids is horrible," one clinic regular told us. "You want to die, like your skin doesn't fit anymore. You want to crawl out of it."

Methadone makes that agony go away.

Yes, there are newer medications to manage opioid addiction — namely,

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HEALTH

Record West Nile spread this year

Presence of the virus in SoCal has reached all-time high, far exceeding the 5-year average

By Madeline Armstrong
MARMSTRONG@SCNG.COM

As another heat wave overtakes Southern California, the presence of West Nile virus has reached record levels.

While West Nile virus has always been present in the state, this year's numbers have far exceeded the five-year average in many regions, from the San Fernando Valley to Long Beach to Orange County to the Inland Empire.

West Nile virus originates in wild birds and is transmitted through mosquitoes. So, if a mosquito bites a bird who has West Nile virus, the mosquito will then spread the disease to the next warm-blooded creature it bites — often humans.

In California, West Nile virus is endemic, meaning that for the past 23 years, at least one human

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CALIFORNIA

State's political divide is along an east-west axis

Study finds coastal residents to left politically of those dwelling inland

By Jeff Horseman
JHORSEMAN@SCNG.COM

Whoever first said "Left Coast" was onto something.

Especially in California.

A study released this month by the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California found the Golden State's left-right political divide running east to west — coastal to inland — instead of north and south.

"A lot of East Coast political types still look at California and think of a north-south divide between Los Angeles and the Bay Area," said Dan Schnur,

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SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY

Battle over auditor post extends beyond election

By Beau Yarbrough
BYARBROUGH@SCNG.COM

The June primary may be over, but San Bernardino County Auditor-Controller/Treasurer/Tax Collector Ensen Mason took his battle with the person elected to replace him, Ryan Hutchison, to

court in San Bernardino on Friday. Mason alleges that Rancho Cucamonga City Councilmember Hutchison doesn't meet the legal requirements to hold the position. California Government Code sets out specific requirements for both

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Rancho Cucamonga City Councilmember Ryan Hutchison, left, defeated San Bernardino County Auditor-Controller/Treasurer/Tax Collector Ensen Mason in the June 2 primary election, but Mason is now contesting the outcome, saying Hutchison doesn't meet the legal requirements to hold the position. COURTESY CITY OF RANCHO CUCAMONGA AND SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY

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