

OPIOIDS: THE COMMUNITY RESPONDS

Recovery support as essential as treatment

By LYNN FERRO

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There are more than 25 million people in recovery from substance use disorders in this country, according to some estimates, and if you extrapolate from that figure to the local level, that means about 10,000 are in Hampshire County.

This is important context when you consider that the battle against the opioid epidemic is being fought on three equally important fronts: prevention, treatment and recovery. One of the most promising developments in the recovery arena is the creation of recovery centers. We are lucky to have a fledgling recovery center on Main Street in Northampton.

Embracing the concept of recovery centers means fully understanding one of the factors that makes the opioid epidemic so hard to conquer: Relapse is often part of the disease. Recovery is challenging, and people in recovery need a lot of support. Risk of relapse is high especially for those in early recovery, running about the same as the risk of relapse for people suffering with the chronic illnesses of diabetes, asthma and hypertension.

Connecting with others supportive of recovery and participating in activities that do not involve substance use are crucial protection against relapse.

These are the reasons Hampshire HOPE, the Northwestern District Attorney's office and a tremendous number of community volunteers have worked together to launch the Northampton Recovery Center.

A little background is in order. In the fall of 2014, the Northwestern District Attorney's office won a federal grant to launch the Northwestern Rx Drug Abuse Task Force with the goal of responding to the root causes of the opioid crisis that has claimed people from all walks of life. Several months later, Hampshire HOPE, an opioid prevention coalition run out of the City of Northampton's Health Department, received state funding to confront what had developed into a devastating public health crisis.

Since then, we have addressed the opioid crisis by making systems-level changes to prevent needless deaths. These changes include support and input into the development of a new state prescription monitoring program, prescriber education, prevention education in the schools and trainings for school nurses, promotion of safe storage and drug disposal practices and making sure Narcan is in the hands of people who can save lives.

A year ago, Hampshire HOPE launched a series of meetings to explore what the community felt was most needed to support recovery. These sessions sought to find the gaps in services while also offering a vision for what a recovery-supportive community might look like. Participants determined their priority to be the development of a peer-run recovery support center in Northampton.

In my role as coordinator for the opioid task force within the DA's office and an active member of Hampshire HOPE, I took the lead in the effort to create that center, modeled on others, including a highly successful one in Greenfield.

The mission statement of the Northampton Recovery Center, written by its members, articulates its goals better than I can: It is “a safe, peer-driven community that provides a positive welcoming environment for people on all pathways and in all stages of recovery from addiction.”

The “peer-driven” part is crucial because all members of the recovery center have a stake and play a role in developing programs, facilitating meetings and groups, and planning events that help build skills important in all aspects of life. The center offers members a positive focus that promotes self-worth and dignity. Working together, members understand that recovery is possible while they rebuild lives that may have gone off track due to addiction.

Northwestern District Attorney Sullivan has supported the NRC from its inception, allowing me to act as interim director, until funding can be found to hire a director. He also plans to incorporate the center as a significant element of the Drug Diversion and Treatment Program, which promotes treatment and recovery support in lieu of prosecution for non-violent offenders with substance use issues. As we worked to open the Northampton Recovery Center, one of the first tasks was finding space. Edwards Church, long a friend to people in recovery, graciously donated space on a temporary basis. With a physical home secured, planning kicked into high gear in October, 2016 and by December, the center held its first public event, a party open to the community.

The NRC opened its doors two afternoons a week in January, offering all-recovery meetings, peer support, yoga, meditation, writing groups, socializing, stress management and other activities in a setting free from stigma.

In addition to offering social support and providing a creative place for people to heal and grow in mind, body and spirit, a long-term goal is to have the funding and staff to connect members to housing, employment and other services. The process of recovery is supported with relationships and positive social networks. This has already proven true at the center.

The NRC draws men and women who live in residential recovery programs, men nearing release from the Hampshire House of Corrections and anyone in recovery participates in program planning and organizing activities. Business owners, agency leaders, and interested community members also attend regularly.

As immediate goals, the center is seeking stable funding and permanent quarters that will allow us to be open for more days of the week and more hours in each day.

Please stop by for a visit either Monday or Wednesday afternoons, or to one of our monthly Friday evening socials. All are welcome.

More information can be found on our website, including a calendar of events, at <https://www.northamptonrecoverycenter.org/>

Lynn Ferro is coordinator for the Northwestern District Attorney's office RX Drug Abuse Task Force. A member of the Hampshire HOPE opioid prevention coalition run out of the city of Northampton's Health Department, she is one of several individuals who contribute to a monthly column in this space about local efforts underway to address the opioid epidemic.

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