

OPINION: The Nation's Opioid Addiction and its Local Impact

By Emma Crosby

America is currently in the grips of an opioid epidemic. Opioids are a group of drugs that contain many frequently prescribed pain relievers, such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, and codeine. The illegal drug heroin is also a form of opioid. It is estimated that 2.1 million people in the United States are currently suffering from substance use disorders related to the use and misuse of prescription opioid pain relievers.

This epidemic has been driven by the overuse and the over prescription of prescription pain relief by medical professionals: a common scenario is that individual patients were given opioid pain relief for a genuine reason (such as a sports injury or twisted limb) and then develop an addiction: this addiction was supported by their medical physicians who continued to supply the pain relief they needed, and by unscrupulous physicians supplementing their income by giving prescription pain relief to addicts.

In 2015 the Government cracked down on the illegal distribution of prescription opioids, and made it much harder for physicians to continually fill repeat prescriptions. Unfortunately this crack down lead many individuals already addicted to legal opioids to turn to more harmful illegal heroin in order to get the relief they needed. As a result, the number of heroin users in the country has more than doubled in the past decade, and we have been left with huge numbers of normal everyday people who are struggling with an addiction to prescription drugs.

Opioid Addiction in New Bedford

Drug abuse is currently rampant in Massachusetts, and New Bedford is also struggling with the epidemic: in 2014 the city famously experienced 15 drug overdoses in a 24 hour period. In January 2016, the University of Massachusetts saw a fatal drug overdose take place and, as a result, a huge number of young people in the local community came forward seeking treatment and support for their own addictions. Drug addiction and abuse is a real problem that is hurting many people in our city, and taking far too many lives. As a result of drug abuse and the need to secure drugs, New Bedford has the highest crime rate in Massachusetts, with a crime rate of 48 per thousand residents: in fact, New Boston has been listed as one of the top 100 most dangerous communities within the United States.

Targeting drug use, and drug-related crime, by offering those with addictions support is a tangible way in which we can help to lower these statistics.

Seeking Local Help and Support

Making the decision to seek treatment and support for your opioid addiction is one of the bravest decisions you can make. Many individuals find it very difficult to admit they have a weakness, and societal judgments can often amplify feelings of shame and embarrassment. Taking that first step and entering rehabilitation or a support group could be the first day of the rest of your life. Continuing sobriety can be just as difficult, particularly in a world where prescription drugs are so easy to access, which is why healthcare professionals recommended treatment and support become a lifelong commitment. There are two useful support groups in the New Bedford area both for opioid addicts looking for support, as well as for their family members, who often suffer in conjunction with their loved one.

Help with Opioid Addiction meets every Wednesday from 7-9 p.m.
Where? First floor conference room at Lowell General Hospital Saints Campus, 1 Hospital Dr., Lowell.

What? The group is run as a collaboration between Bedford Police and Bedford Youth and Family Services. The aim of the group is to will reach out to Bedford residents who are struggling with an opioid addiction and their families, and to provide access to vital resources. Family and loved ones can be enrolled onto a peer-led support which will teach them coping strategies, whilst addicts can be trained to administer Narcan: a drug designed to relieve the symptoms of withdrawal. Participants receive two doses of Narcan free at their first meeting as well as assistance with any detox problems. For information: 508-801-3247.

Bedford Al-Anon Parents' Group meets every Tuesday from 7.30-8.30pm

Where? Room 204, First Parish Church on the Common, 75 Great Road.

This is a support group for friends and family members who are affected by a loved one's alcohol or drug use. They aim of the group is to teach strategies for self-care in a welcoming group. For information: 781-275-0540 or 781-275-7994.