

# Firefighters now following up with those who overdose in New London

Published May 17, 2019 6:02PM

By **Lindsay Boyle**

## Get the weekly rundown

Sign up to receive our weekly Legal Insider newsletter

**Email\***

New London — A plan **first discussed last year** (<https://www.theday.com/policefirecourts/20181215/firefighters-hope-to-follow-up-with-those-who-overdose-in-new-london>) became reality Tuesday as a firefighter joined an outreach worker to follow up with people who have overdosed in the city.

The goal of the part-time, grant-funded program is to tell people who aren't in crisis about substance abuse and mental health services they can access — an opportunity first responders rarely have.

“Right now it's in its infancy,” fire Chief Tom Curcio said of the program. “But it seems like it's going to be well received.”

It works like this: Each Tuesday and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., one uniformed firefighter joins recovery navigator Leigh Stepanian to visit addresses where people have overdosed.

At each location, they identify themselves and what they're doing. Sometimes they speak directly to the person who overdosed. Other times, they leave the message with a roommate or a friend, or leave a business card.

“We're still trying to figure out the lay of the land and how we're going to work together,” said Carol Jones, director of harm reduction for Alliance for Living, a nonprofit whose core focus is providing services to people living with HIV. “But already it's heartwarming to see how much the firefighters really do care about the people of our city.”

Jones, who went with Stepanian and the firefighters to some houses this week, has overseen New London's navigator program since **it began in April last year** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20180506/recovery-navigators-helping-people-get-into-drug-treatment>).

Recovery navigators encourage people to consider medication-assisted treatment — or the practice of combining therapy with medications that reduce the symptoms of withdrawal — but also discuss safer ways to use, such as using Alliance for Living's syringe exchange program, or keeping the overdose-reversal drug naloxone on hand.

In addition to Stepanian, whose 20-hour weeks are funded by a **two-year, \$75,000 federal grant** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20190105/norwich-new-london-get-new-grants-to-address-addiction>) from the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, or DMHAS, the city employs four other navigators, three of whom are full-time.

Funding for those navigators, who aren't confined to New London, comes from a **\$262,500 federal grant** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20181208/grant-to-help-opioid-action-team-expand-services-to-norwich>) the University of Baltimore awarded Ledge Light Health District last December.

Curcio said Jennifer Muggeo, Ledge Light's supervisor of administration, finance and special projects, first asked him whether firefighters would want to follow up with people who overdosed.

"I jumped at the chance," he said. "It gets us out into the public more and lets people know they can reach out and we can help further — not just during the emergency, but after."

Curcio said about 30 of the city's 64 firefighters signed up for the voluntary program. A single firefighter is picked each Tuesday and Thursday based on availability and gets paid his or her usual salary through the DMHAS grant, he said.

"I don't want to say (the firefighters) are excited," Curcio said, noting the grimness that surrounds addiction, "but I think it's good for them to follow up with someone that has had a problem."

So far this year, New London firefighters have responded to 21 overdoses, Human Services Director Jeanne Milstein said.

Three of them have been fatal.

The number of overdoses "has gone down," Curcio said, "but sometimes in the nicer weather, we'll start seeing more outside and in vehicles."

"Time will tell here," he said.

Curcio said Stepanian and a firefighter visited six homes Tuesday and saw at least eight more Thursday.

"I think it's a great thing to try to help people recover from things like this," he said. "Hopefully it's a success and we'll get funding again next year."

[l.boyle@theday.com](mailto:l.boyle@theday.com) (<mailto:l.boyle@theday.com>)

## **STORIES THAT MAY INTEREST YOU**

### **North Stonington man charged with home invasion ([/policefirecourts/20191120/north-stonington-man-charged-with-home-invasion](#))**

Marc Caswell allegedly assaulted someone with a baseball bat.

### **Police logs — Nov. 20, 2019 ([/policefirecourts/20191120/police-logs-x2014-nov-20-2019](#))**

Arrests by state police and local departments around the region.

### **Water main break in Waterford closes road ([/policefirecourts/20191119/water-main-break-in-waterford-closes-road](#))**

Drivers are to stay away from the Fog Plain/Sandy Hollow road area.