

# Grant to help Opioid Action Team expand services to Norwich

Published December 08, 2018 8:41PM

By **Lindsay Boyle**

New London — Armed with a new \$262,500 federal grant, the Opioid Action Team of Southeastern Connecticut is expanding its recovery navigator program to Norwich.

The team used a \$135,000 grant from the same source — the University of Baltimore — to employ two part-time navigators in New London in April.

Since then, Trisha Rios and Mark Peake **have been meeting with people who struggle with addiction** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20180506/recovery-navigators-helping-people-get-into-drug-treatment>), whether at the Homeless Hospitality Center, on City Pier or inside homes. Some of the meetings are chance; others are arranged by phone.

When possible, the navigators explain medications such as Suboxone, methadone and Vivitrol. The medications reduce symptoms of withdrawal and, when paired with therapy, are **clinically effective but “greatly underused,”** (<https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/treatment>) the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has said.

The navigators find available treatment for those who are ready, and offer advice and friendship throughout the process.

But Rios and Peake also find people who aren't ready to seek treatment. In those cases, they discuss safer ways to use, such as visiting **Alliance for Living's syringe exchange program** (<https://www.theday.com/article/20170915/NWS01/170919558>) or keeping the overdose-reversal drug naloxone on hand.

“The navigator program is rooted in harm reduction,” said Jennifer Muggeo, supervisor of administration, finance and special projects for Ledge Light Health District, which oversees the federal grant.

“Certainly we have a goal of connecting people with medication-based treatment,” she said, “but we first want to provide people with whatever support they need at that moment.”

Muggeo said the navigators have contacted 144 people, 76 of whom are now in treatment.

The action team isn't sure how many navigators it will employ in Norwich — that depends on who applies for the position and how many hours they can work — but said the jobs would be posted soon and could be filled by February.

“We're really excited,” said Lee-Ann Gomes, Norwich's human services director. “The navigators are outreach-oriented ... they're not in an office or anything like that.”

Gomes said the navigators will complement other efforts to combat the opioid crisis in Norwich, where **32 people died by overdose last year** (<https://www.theday.com/policefirecourts/20180306/norwich-new-london-see-2-of-states-7-carfentanil-deaths>).

“We're looking forward to having more people who can do that kind of work in our area,” she said.

Muggeo said the team also will use grant money to market the recovery navigator phone line, which is ideal for those who don't live in New London or Norwich. Once the new members are working, the navigators will take their services anywhere in New London County.

This year's grant will increase access to Suboxone, too, by increasing the number of area physicians who can prescribe it, Muggeo said. The grant also funded a new partnership in which Community Health Center Inc. is giving the action team — and, by extension, the navigators — dedicated access to a prescriber.

“We need to connect people with initiation and medication when they’re ready, not when the provider has an opening in a week or two,” she said. “We need to remove those days when they may use something that leads to them overdosing.”

The University of Baltimore, working with the Office of National Drug Control Policy and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, **funded 12 projects in 10 states** (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/ondcp-announces-nearly-3-million-grants-local-programs-fighting-opioid-epidemic/>) this year. Ledge Light was the only Connecticut grantee.

To reach the navigators, call or text (860) 333-3494.

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