



United in 'moment in time' against deadly addiction

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The Day Editorial Board (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=editorialboard)

Deadly addiction to opioid drugs, incorrigible as it is, is not hopeless. If you or a loved one has this disease, you don't have to fight alone, or wait so long for treatment that you give up, or go to jail, or keep using because of the complications of getting into a program. You carry no stigma, only the burden of a disease you cannot defeat alone.

Are all these assurances true? Not yet. But to provide such assurance and support to every opioid-addicted person in this community is the mission of the New London Opioid Action Team, whose members know more about the strangling tentacles of opioid addiction than anyone. In the four months since these professional caregivers, recovering addicts, family members of overdose victims, the mayor and police and fire officials came together, they have developed a plan to fight addiction on every front.

They have the experience to know what they are talking about and the passion to end the epidemic that killed more than 900 Connecticut residents in 2016 and (<http://www.theday.com/local/20170224/connecticut-sees-more-than-900-fatal-overdoses-in-2016>) continues unabated.

Inspired by what grieves and frustrates them, they are saying, "Enough. This is the moment in time" to: intercept people at court right after a drug arrest with a chance to enter treatment instead of jail; flood the area with access to naloxone (Narcan), the overdose antidote; educate children as young as elementary school about the dangers and the general public about the ubiquity of drugs and their victims; lobby for continued federal funds for treatment and prevention; certify recovery houses before they get federal subsidies; and in doing all this, clear up the old notion that addiction itself is a stigma and a shame.

As a community response it can be the answer to the prayers of those who are addicted and their families. It can serve as a desperately needed model for attacking a complex problem on all fronts.

The beginning premise is that addiction is an ambulatory but deadly disease that can look like something else, just as obesity can look like self-indulgence or depression like a failure to buck up. Precisely because a few people do have access to the resources needed to fight their illness, it can seem, falsely, that others' relapse is a sign of weakness, earning the stigma addiction has carried in the past.

The team's plan, which will be rolling out for years to come, starts now. It bases its response to addiction crises as "moments in time" when intervention could change the course. A syringe program, for example, puts an addicted person in touch with Alliance for Living counselors; an ambulance trip to Yale-New Haven Health/Lawrence + Memorial Hospital after being revived by naloxone is a moment to meet recovery coaches who can help with getting into treatment.

We are struck by the intelligence, compassion and expertise that has gone into the team's planning, and so was U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal when presented with it Wednesday by representatives of all 25 agencies and the private individuals on the team.

Blumenthal, whose bent for consumer advocacy traveled with him to the Senate from the state Attorney General's office, confirmed the fears of the group that President Trump's budget proposals would, if enacted, decimate programs to prevent, educate, treat and research addiction, including the Centers of Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health. The senator was correct when he told the group the cuts pose a threat to national security. Hundreds of thousands of citizens sickened and impoverished by enslavement to addiction weakens the United States, and the market that entices criminals to smuggle the drugs into the country makes it worse.

If the state Senate follows the House of Representatives' vote Wednesday to strengthen access to insurance and treatment, the New London Opioid Action Team's task will have state-level assistance it sorely needs. Connecticut's entire congressional delegation has said they will each fight against the proposed cuts, and on Thursday announced newly available funds for equipping first responders and increased access to treatment.

For The Day's part, the newspaper and its website have been covering the opioid crisis in depth with our "Deadly Addiction" (<http://www.theday.com/apps/pbcs.dll/search?Category=search&q=Deadly%20Addiction&Kat=%25&Simple=0&Max=840&Start=25>) reporting since 2014, and will continue to do so. Any light we can shed, and any editorial support we can offer to inform the public, we are committed to give. That includes opposition to the president's merciless health care plan and his shortsighted health and human services budget.

You can do something, too. Open your eyes to the suffering caused by opioid addiction in your family, neighborhood or workplace. It's there. And it needs compassion, not stigmatizing.

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