

A Community Partnership: Addressing the Opiate Epidemic

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It was clear to everyone at Penndel Mental Health Center (PMHC) that opiate addiction was having a devastating impact on individuals and families throughout Bucks County. Though PMHC does not provide traditional treatment for substance abuse, we serve many people who have a co-occurring psychiatric and substance abuse disorder, defined as having a primary diagnosis of mental illness but also actively using and/or having a history of using or abusing alcohol or drugs. This problem crossed all boundaries; it was affecting people of all races and socio-economic levels, and young people as well as adults. The impact was wide and vast. People were dying of opiate overdoses and our community was looking for solutions and support.

Kristen Cann, a Referral Specialist at Penndel Mental Health Center, learning of yet another opiate-related death in Lower Bucks County, decided that she and PMHC needed to get more involved. She knew how scared, frustrated, and angry she felt when confronted with the opiate epidemic and knew that others must be feeling the

same way. She'd been hearing the fear, frustration, and hopelessness in the voices of neighbors and friends as well as clients and their family members who were being impacted by opiate and other substance abuse. Kristen proposed a plan: PMHC could assist the community by providing a forum -- or Town Hall Meeting -- where people could come together to obtain resources and information on mental illness and substance abuse disorders, including where to find treatment and support.

Kristen decided to contact one of the local high schools, Harry S. Truman High School in Bristol Township, to see if they'd be interested in working with her on this project. She was immediately introduced to Jim Ewart, a guidance counselor at the high school who is very active in supporting students who are in recovery. Jim was very excited to join forces with Kristen and together they connected with various groups and individuals in the Lower Bucks County community, including but not limited to faith-based organizations, mental health and substance abuse treatment centers, recovery housing providers, and community leaders.

On April 20th 2017, Harry S. Truman High School and PennDel Mental Health Center hosted a "Community Health Town Hall" at Truman High School to address issues related to opiate abuse. During this two-hour event, community members including the Honorable Tina Davis, Pennsylvania State Representative, Diane Rosati, MA, Executive Director of the Bucks County Drug &

Alcohol Commission, Scott Flemming, owner of New Found Freedom Recovery Houses, Nathan (Nate) Ezzo, a clinical services supervisor at Pennel Mental Health Center, and Matt Weintraub, Bucks County District Attorney discussed their respective roles in combating this epidemic and presented various resources that are available to support those who have experienced substance abuse.

While planning this event, Kristen and Jim were determined to provide a forum that would take a very positive approach in discussing this difficult topic. All presenters were encouraged to use "person-first language," and all speakers and participants were reminded to be non-judgmental when participating in discussions, to discourage the stigma associated with individuals who struggle with substance abuse issues. Community members were also reminded that mental illness and co-occurring disorders are not a choice, as addiction affects a person mentally, emotionally, and physically. It was further explained that the addiction, along with negatively constructed cognitive beliefs, become physically engrained in the affected person -- therefore a person cannot easily decide to quit- since the body will not allow it.

The audience was invited to ask questions and speak to the panel at great length about important issues, some of which are listed below:

How to access substance abuse treatment for oneself or a friend or family member;

How treatment is funded and/or paid for;

What, if anything, the Pennsylvania State Legislature is doing to limit how and when opiates are prescribed; and

How law enforcement addresses individuals in the community with substance abuse issues including the use of Narcan.

Nate Ezzo, LCSW, encouraged the audience and panel to refer friends, family, and anyone who they feel are at-risk and need assistance, for mental health treatment, as it is common for individuals who abuse substances to have an undiagnosed mental illness. Nate reminded participants that many mental health facilities, including PMHC, serve a large co-occurring population where comprehensive, integrated care is provided. He described some of the many risk factors to which young people are exposed, such as early experience to trauma and substance use. PMHC treats a significant number of young clients whose parents also receive mental health and substance abuse services, which is a good indicator that chronic behavioral and emotional issues become perpetuated in homes and in communities. Young clients see negative coping behaviors modeled by parents, guardians, and friends -- so the longer a youth waits to enter treatment, the more engrained these behaviors and emotional deficits

become.

Nate explained that mental illness and co-occurring issues are chronic and ever-changing and recovery from these issues is not linear. It is not simplistic, easy, or one-size-fits-all. Mental illness and co-occurring issues do not develop overnight, nor can they be "cured" in a set number of sessions, as recovery is ongoing.

In addition to the speaker presentations, information, materials, and resources were available from numerous Bucks County Human Service agencies in the school's lobby. Agency representatives also spoke with residents about services provided in agencies that help people recovery from mental illness and/or drug and alcohol abuse.

The April Town Hall Meeting at Truman High School was well attended. Participants were very grateful for the information and support they received and the event earned considerable support and enthusiasm from various community groups. Refreshments were donated by New Found Freedom Recovery Houses and by Durham Deli as a thank you to speakers, agency representatives, and to those who attended the event. Holding community forums like this encourages parents, schools, law enforcement, first responders, and other community-based organizations, who work on the front lines of crisis situations, to encourage those who struggle with addiction and/or mental illness to seek treatment and

support. This event was also an opportunity for us, as advocates for mental health and drug and alcohol treatment, to highlight the important work that community-based mental health and co-occurring agencies perform every day. We also felt it was imperative to remind legislators and other community leaders to remember these important issues when developing or enacting policies and regulations that affect their constituents. When community members better understand, and embrace the service structures that are in place to impact the opiate epidemic, the stigma that is often associated with seeking treatment for mental illness and/or addiction may decrease. Because the Town Hall Meeting was such a success, PMHC hopes to replicate this event at other schools throughout Lower Bucks County.