

Barbara Royal
Administrative Director
Open Door Recovery Center
P.O. Box 958
Ellsworth, Me. 04605
207-667-3210
Fax: 207-667-3133

"Legal Drugs, Illegal Purposes: the Escalating Abuse of Prescription Medications"

Introduction

Open Door Recovery Center has been operating in Ellsworth, Me. for the past 20 years as an Outpatient Substance Abuse Treatment Center, serving Hancock, Washington, and Penobscot Counties. Open Door treats adults, adolescents, and families. We provide prevention education in five school systems in Hancock County and part of Washington County. We have a contract with Maine Coast Memorial Hospital for detox services, both in and outpatient. We never turn away those who have no means to pay. Up until the past several months, alcohol and some poly drug abuse were the primary drugs of our clients. We have experienced a steady increase in the abuse of prescription drugs leading to heroin addiction and a higher level of poly drug abuse, in particular over the past 18 months. During the past 6 to 8 weeks there has been an even greater increase of "walk-ins" needing immediate attention for opiate withdrawal. The age group that seems to be the hardest hit are 18 to 25 year olds. Part of the cause for this may be the age of onset of use, being mid to late teens. Now at age 21-22 young people are crashing, running out of money, and becoming homeless. They come to us desperate, frightened, and angry. The available resources for serving their needs are so limited as to make it near impossible to arrange the treatment they truly need. When you look into the eyes of one of these young people, seeing the depth of their desperation, knowing you will not be able to place them safely where they need to be now, in order to save them from themselves and their dealers, then multiply this by several each day, you can begin to get a glimpse of the magnitude of the problem. Because most hospitals are not equipped to handle inpatient detox for most of these individuals, we have no choice but to try outpatient detox for most of them. We have had little to no success. Unless they are able to begin the process in a safe, inpatient environment where staff are trained to work with addicts, the addict usually ends up back at the dealers within

a short period of time.

Problems with drugs:

- 1. Prescription drugs needed for legitimate pain management have been over prescribed and mismanaged by some over the past 2-3 years, with a particular concentration in Washington County. This has permeated surrounding counties over a period of several months.**
- 2. As tolerance builds the need for stronger, easier to access, and cheaper drugs are needed. This is where the graduation to heroin begins.**
- 3. Heroin is gradually becoming the drug of choice regardless availability of other opiates, especially in that younger age group.**
- 4. Alcohol, pot, benzodiazapines, cocaine, club drugs continue to be serious problems. Often individuals combine several of these during use. This can and does lead to overdose.**

Problems with services:

- 1. There are no where near enough detox facilities. This is a set up for the addict to fail, be a danger to others, commit suicide, or accidental death.**
- 2. Outpatient treatment will not work for many addicts who meet the criteria for inpatient treatment. We have little to no chance of finding a placement. Waiting lists vary 3 to 6 months.**
- 3. There are not enough physicians and nurses trained to provide inpatient detox.**
- 4. Hospitals are not set up with the necessary space to treat addicts. Addicts who are in withdrawal should not, as a rule, be placed with med/surg. patients.**
- 5. Every county should have a drug court. Treatment needs to be mandated as an alternative to jail when appropriate.**
- 6. There is a serious shortage of Substance Abuse Counselors in the State. (For Open Door, it is difficult to compete with higher salaries and benefits being offered in other areas).**

Problems with expenses:

- 1. It is more expensive to a community and the state, to incarcerate, make repeat visits to Emergency Rooms, have school drop outs, and homeless individuals, than it is to detox and treat them for substance abuse.**
- 2. Probation officers are overwhelmed with caseloads full of individuals who truly need treatment.**

3. Jails and prisons are full of individuals who will eventually be free, untreated for substance abuse, and repeat the same patterns again and again.

4. The less treatment the more crime the more material and financial loss to the community members.

5. Insurance companies make it a great challenge to arrange for the services that do exist.

6. The greatest expense of all is both loss of quality of life for individuals and families, and/or loss of life itself.

Problems with schools:

1. Every school system needs a full time substance abuse counselor. Students suffering from addiction are at risk as are the classmates attending school with them. For every addict there are at least 10 individuals directly affected by their disease and 25 more affected indirectly.

2. We are living in an age where every administrator, teacher and school board member should have education in regards to the disease of addiction and the impact it has.

Problems with health issues:

1. HIV & AIDS

2. Hepatitis C

3. Pancreatitis

4. Heart

5. Cirrhosis

6. Poor Nutrition

7. Sexually Transmitted Diseases

8. General Health Issues

How our clients present in general with drugs of choice:

Adults

1. Alcohol

2. Pot

3. Opiates
4. Benzodiazapines
5. Club drugs, ecstasy, LSD, cocaine

Adolescents

1. Opiates (both synthetic and heroin)
2. Alcohol
3. Pot
4. Benzodiazines
5. Club drugs, ecstasy, LSD, cocaine

Population abusing substances:

Every walk of life! No one is immune to addiction regardless their history, financial status, abilities academically, standing in the work force, etc. We have watched honor students, student council leaders, top athletes, and students coming from stable homes, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly lose everything. Family relationships, and short and long term goals fall apart. We also see adolescents coming from homes where parents are also addicted and actively using, homeless, dropouts, sexual abuse victims, physical/emotional abuse victims, eating disorders, generally feeling hopeless and alone.

Without alternatives addicts continue to gravitate toward other addicts. Targeted houses and neighborhoods become hangouts for those who are lost and desperate. Sick people are trying to help sick people, primarily by helping them to stay high.

Solutions:

1. There needs to be a multifaceted approach. A. Prevention B. Detox/Treatment C. Law Enforcement
2. The Ideal: A. Substance Abuse Counselor for every school system including education, counseling, referrals. B. Sufficient facilities that provide a detox program that transitions into the treatment phase of recovery by direct admit. (In other words, no time on the street between detox and treatment), including sufficiently trained physicians, nurses, substance abuse counselors. C. Sufficient law enforcement to control trafficking. D. Drug Courts including sufficient providers for clients who enter that program.

Summary

I see this as a "Tidal Wave". We are all on the shore together. We have been hit by waves that are gradually growing in size. However, the big one has not hit yet. It is coming and when it does we will be crushed. I spent my morning today in the ER with a 20 year old heroin addict. He spent the night in withdrawal there in the ER with nurses. I was called in at 7:00 AM. When I left my home to drive to the hospital I prayed for a miracle knowing that I may not be able to find a bed for him. We got our miracle today. I was able to find a bed, and much quicker than usual. If I had not he would have returned to the street as he is living in a tent in the woods. His comment to me was... people don't get it, what will happen when all the old people die and the young people are out there addicted like me... He was one of two 20 year old heroin addicts I needed to refer today. One being born to parents who used heroin throughout the time his mother was pregnant with him, he is now homeless with no family support; the other coming from a stable, loving home with a lot of family support. This disease has no favorites. It wants to own all.

Note: This past Sept.'02 ODRC and the City of Ellsworth wrote a grant for Targeted Expansion Substance Abuse Services. Several weeks ago Senator Collin's office was kind enough to research the status of those moneys for that Federal Grant. We scored very high, however the moneys were cut by 17.9 million. Therefore we were not chosen. This grant would have allowed Open Door to hire 3 full time substance abuse counselors for the schools in Hancock County and a part of Washington County, a full time Family Counselor, another full time Substance Abuse Counselor, a van for transporting clients to treatment and AA/NA, and a system for assessing needs and tracking results for every high school student in two to five high schools. Senator Collin's office encouraged us to reapply should this grant "open" again. Thank you for your help.

Barbara Royal, Director

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