

Naloxone: Addressing the Tough Questions

Summary of Responses

Beaver County Town Hall Meeting November 3, 2017

Question 1: Why is naloxone free, when medication for other illnesses is so expensive?

Answer: It is not free. While there are some community groups that provide it, grants or donations fund the purchase of the naloxone, as do grants that are handled through Beaver County's Single County Authority (SCA). The District Attorney's office is administering funds that were seized by convicted drug dealers, which have been used to purchase hundreds of doses of naloxone. Also, the EMS personnel do deliver many treatments that are unrecoverable and that does not prevent them from treating patients.

Question 2: Why do you revive the same person again and again? When is enough enough?

Answer: The simple answer is that the person will die if we don't revive them. Evidence shows that it often requires more than one course of treatment for individuals in addiction to move into recovery, but if allowed to die, 0% of them will have the opportunity. The EMS team would never deny lifesaving treatment to anyone in a life threatening situation, such as overdose, and a law enforcement officer should not be tasked with the responsibility of standing over a dying person, allowing them to take their last breath, when a lifesaving option is available.

Question 3: Why are law enforcement officers carrying naloxone? We have medical personnel for that.

Answer: The officers are usually first on the scene. If they cannot administer the naloxone, the individual will die before EMS personnel can arrive. Additionally, law enforcement officers can be exposed to deadly doses of synthetic opioids such as fentanyl. The naloxone can be needed to protect the officer as well.

Question 4: After a naloxone reversal, where does the "system" stop working?

Answer: This is the missing link that most communities are trying to address, to discover next steps. In Pennsylvania, there is no law forcing individuals into any medical treatment, including addiction treatment. There are some novel approaches in Beaver County such as the option of charging the individual with a misdemeanor, allowing them to make a choice about accepting criminal punishment or electing a treatment option.

This does lead to the question about whether enough treatment beds are available, which can be a problem. Engaging the services of the county SCA can be helpful in making repeated phone calls to request services from available treatment facilities until a treatment option becomes

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available. Even then, the truth is that there probably are not enough services available for the people who need to access them.

The “warm hand-off” approach, where individuals are linked to treatment encompasses a team of helpers to connect people to services when they need them. It is newly underway in Beaver County and the hope is that we will begin to see solutions to some of the missing links in the system, allowing more people to be treated and get into recovery.

Question 5: Why aren't users forced into involuntary detox / treatment after a reversal?

Answer: In Pennsylvania, we cannot force adults into treatment. In some cases, the individual can be held for up to 72 hours if they are deemed to be a threat to themselves or others, but that only allows time to hold a court hearing for a further mental health evaluation. The Marchman Act in Florida allows a family member who is worried about a person with a life-threatening addiction, to file a court request that the judge order a drug and alcohol assessment, followed by a second hearing when the judge can order up to a 60 day treatment period.

For minors however, there is a protective action called Act 53, which allows parents to request that the court require either inpatient or outpatient treatment for their children. This option is available and being utilized currently in Beaver County.

Question 6: Why aren't you doing more to target dealers?

Answer: There is a federal statute that allows charges against dealers who sell drugs that result in death. The punishment can include up to 20 years in jail. There have been 18 cases in Beaver County which have been investigated and prosecuted using this law.

For an individual who overdoses but does not die, there is no federal charge that applies. Working with the state legislature could change that.

Question 7: What are you doing to prevent drug addiction?

Answer: Individuals living in isolation are at risk of developing addiction. Also, when reviewing the statistics of overdose deaths, it is startling to realize that the individuals who are dying are the same ones who experienced a lifetime of anti-drug curriculum throughout their time in school. We have to do a better job, a different job, with the lessons we teach. There is no simple answer, but identifying the gaps and holding events such as this town hall meeting is a good start.

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One innovative approach might be to utilize individuals who are living in recovery, to help guide better approaches with our youth. In Beaver County, the Intermediate Unit which assists every district in the county, has prepared community wide forums to address the issues facing parents and youth.

Another important endeavor is to get the extra drugs out of our home spaces. Using drug take-back boxes, or limiting prescriptions following minor procedures such as wisdom teeth removal are solid steps.

Question 8: What are you doing to reduce the stigma of addiction?

Answer: There are people we pass by every day, who suffer from addiction – including parents, lawyers, doctors, police officers, police officers – anyone can suffer from addiction. And telling someone that they are unworthy, because they have an issue or a problem is cruel. Everyone is valuable.

This epidemic does not discriminate. Law enforcement officers are seeing that the individuals they encounter who suffer from addiction are different than the criminal drug dealer. The war on drugs used to be seen as a war on criminals, but other tools are available now.

Recognizing that we can all be one poor choice away from being in that boat, and this can affect people of any age, race, or income category. Every life has value and purpose. And we have to remember that addiction is a brain disease. By the time individuals seek treatment, their life has become unmanageable, and their life is beginning to fall apart. And probably everyone we meet has something happening, and we should be very, very careful not to judge.

It is also important for care-takers and community helpers to take care of themselves. It can be exhausting to take care of those with addiction issues, when can in turn result in some “vicarious trauma” or a feeling of frustration. The frustration can lead to its own stigma, so taking care of the care takers is important.

Question 9: Why are we spending so many resources on helping people with addictions instead of helping veterans?

Answer: Actually, veterans are a priority population for treatment. There is special care to help assist them with any co-occurring disorders and meet them at their comfort level. Beaver County has a veteran’s court, which is an intense program that has many resources right in the courtroom to be helpful. Often, mental health or substance use disorders are identified and a collaborative approach with many team members occurs to help the veteran stay on track.