

# Heroin treatment options called 'woefully inadequate'

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Treatment options for heroin addiction locally seem to be "woefully inadequate," according to a panel addressing the issue at a forum Thursday at the Tompkins County Public Library.

That sentiment was echoed among all of the panelists, including Andy Taylor, a case worker at the Southern Tier AIDS Program; Bill Rusen, CEO of Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services; Rob Brown, administrative coordinator for Ithaca Health Alliance; Nicelee Hollenback, of the Drug and Alcohol Council; and Judy Epstein, president of the board of Ithaca Community Recovery.

Each of the panelists handle addiction in the community in different ways. They answered questions that emerged after the last forum on heroin in the community, held in June. While the last forum discussed the immense scale of heroin addiction in the community, Thursday's forum focused on treatment options available — or not available.

Everyone is at risk for addiction, panel facilitator Jacob Parker Carver said. "There is no stereotype for a heroin addict. The quantity of heroin on the streets has risen dramatically in the last few years, and the price has dropped. Heroin use has become more prevalent because it's cheap and accessible," Carver said. It's a serious life-threatening issue "that we can't turn our backs

## Community resources

- Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services: carsny.org
- Alcohol & Drug Council of Tompkins County: alcoholdrugcouncil.org
- Community Coalition for Healthy Youth: healthyouth.org
- Ithaca Community Recovery (518 W. Seneca St.): ithacacommunityrecovery.org
- Ithaca Health Alliance: ithacahhealth.org/freeclinic.html

on," he said.

The first question posed to panelists was: "What does treatment for heroin or opiate addiction look like in your world?"

"It looks woefully inadequate," Taylor said. "As a case manager, I only have what we, in this community, have to offer — and I say woefully inadequate because we can only do what we can as a system. We have to make a system that fits the majority of the people. And unfortunately, they probably aren't getting enough individual attention, individualized care."

Another question posed was "How do people find or come to you for services?" Most panelists said clients learn of them by word of mouth. (A list of resources is available with this report.)

Taylor, a former addict, said often people seek help or walk through their door when the problem has become unsustainable. "They're looking for any port in the storm," he said.

Treating addiction requires careful planning, Tay-

lor said. After-care is also extremely important, he said. "Addiction is something that doesn't end. You're always working."

Rusen likened addiction to a chronic disease. He said treatment is not over when a patient walks out the door.

"At CARS (Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services), we're the acute part of the treatment intervention for a long-term chronic problem," Rusen said.

Taylor and Epstein said the recovery community in Ithaca is strong.

"The recovery community is so compassionate ... it just blew me away the first time I started to experience some of

that," Epstein said.

When asked what challenges they face, some panelists said stigma and culture.

"One of the biggest challenges that I find professionally is trying to combat our culture, which is a culture of more, faster, now, immediate results as quickly as possible. It's also a culture that seems to be doing a very good job of breeding substance users," Taylor said. "In my opinion, we celebrate poorly in this country. We celebrate from the perspective of 'Well, when you're going to have a good time, there might be some consequences with having a

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good time.’”

“I believe that there will come a time when you treat addiction like exactly what it is — which is a public health problem,” Rusen said. “When you have a public health problem and you define it that way, and you resource it that way, then you have progress.”

Rusen said he always asks people, “Where were we at with AIDS before?” He said once the stigma was banished, time, money and resources came up with an effective treatment that was widely available.

“When you don’t treat it like a public health problem, and then you realize it’s a health problem, you haven’t built any infrastructure to really take care of it. That’s the main challenge that we have, and that’s systemic and it underlines everything else,” Rusen said.

Panelists said there are not enough resources in the community to help people detox. “If we had a walk-in detox center, right here in the middle of Ithaca, if you could just walk in and get detoxed that day, how big do you think that building would need to be?”

“Maybe the Old Library?” Hollenback said. To get detoxed, people from Ithaca have to go to Syracuse, panelists said.

One woman in the audience said changes are not happening fast enough for those who are losing people to this disease.

District Attorney Gwen Wilkinson, who was among the audience of about 35 people, spoke about the problem in the



KELSEY O'CONNOR / STAFF PHOTO

At least 35 people showed up for the forum on treating heroin addiction held Thursday at the Tompkins County Public Library.

community. Wilkinson is part of the Ithaca Municipal Drug Policy Committee.

“The reason this committee was convened was because there is a huge problem, there is a heroin epidemic. People are dying,” Wilkinson said. “There are inadequate or insufficient treatment models. There aren’t enough beds. It takes too long to get into treatment. If you don’t have insurance, it could take four months on a waiting list. For someone who’s addicted to heroin, that means getting a fix or as many fixes as they need every day until they can get a bed. It’s unacceptable, and why is it like that? It’s like that because we have been trained to think about ‘the drug problem’ as a problem of a crime, as a problem of minorities ... as a problem that can be prosecuted away.”

As an assistant district attorney in the ‘90s, Wilkinson tried case after case of felony drug sales and put a lot of people in state prison, she said. “And you know

what, that didn’t cure their addiction. That didn’t change the problem we have in our society.”

Wilkinson said she believes the committee will take a more holistic approach to the problem. She said there will be a steering away from a prosecution model.

“People need to think of the heroin problem as health problem, a mental health problem. What it isn’t is a problem — we don’t need more cops, we don’t need more prisons. We need less. And that’s pretty ironic coming from the district attorney,” Wilkinson said.

More from the committee will be revealed at a news conference Feb. 24, she said.

“It really ought to be as easy to get into treatment as it is to get into jail,” Wilkinson said to applause.

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