

## **Greenwich Launches New Program to Examine Heroin and Opioid Abuse**

By Ken Borsuk

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*At left, Alan Mathis, president and CEO of Liberation Programs joined First Selectman Peter Tesei for the launch of a new study of Greenwich to determine the extent of heroin and opioid abuse in town.*

GREENWICH — The town is launching a six-week study of heroin and opioid abuse so programs can be created to help alleviate the problem. In announcing the study Monday, First Selectman Peter Tesei said the town could not wait any longer to find out what's happening. There were five overdose deaths in Greenwich in 2015 because of opioids.

"This is an issue that not only affects Greenwich, it affects our country," Tesei said. "It has raised itself in the national political debate, particularly up in New Hampshire...We know there is a problem. We know that it knows no economic boundary and knows no racial or ethnic boundary. It is a serious problem and one that in order to address we must have the proper data."

The study will be conducted by the town Department of Social Services and Liberation Programs, a Fairfield County-wide substance abuse counseling and treatment center with local outposts at Greenwich High School and the YMCA of Greenwich. Tesei was joined at a press conference by town Commissioner of Social Services Alan Barry and Liberation Programs' President and CEO Alan Mathis.

"While we hear on the news about drug busts and overdose deaths, what we don't know is the full extent of the opioid and heroin addiction problem in Greenwich," Barry said. "Drug overdose is a leading cause of accidental death in the U.S. and opioid addiction contributes to 62 percent of the overdoses, both for prescription medication and heroin."

In 2015, Barry said, there were 723 accidental overdoses in Connecticut, a 15 percent increase from the year before. He said the numbers might be underreported because of the stigma associated with drug abuse.

Information gathering will include surveys and focus groups. Three researchers and three consultants will do the work, including talking with first responders, teachers, parents and kids. The tab is being picked up by Liberation Programs. The cost of the project was not immediately available.

Information collected for the study will be aggregated to protect the sources.

"We want to hear from young people and everyone in the town of Greenwich what they believe is the root of this problem and the pathway out of it," Mathis said. "No voice will go unheard. No other community is taking this on and inviting a guy like me with 30 years of experience to peel back the layers of onion to get at the root," Mathis said. "That's what we need to do here. We need to tell the truth. We're going to get this issue out of the closet, and when we do, we're going to save the lives of young people and make our families strong again. That's really the key."

By establishing a baseline, Barry said, prevention and treatment efforts can be coordinated to make sure resources are applied in the right areas. The goal of the study is to use the finding as a catalyst for change and to develop an action plan," Tesei said. "Clearly this is not something that just materialized. It has been growing. Certainly I don't think there is one individual or one family who has not been exposed to or knows someone who has had the unfortunate experience of becoming addicted," he said. "This is a real opportunity, knowing we have an organization like Liberation right here in Greenwich, to support them and join with them to see if we can eradicate the issue."

Prescription drug use is a big part of the problem, Barry said, because of the risk of misuse, addiction and overdose; in 2013, 207 million prescriptions were written in the United States for opiates, enough to give every American adult their own bottle of pills.

People addicted to opiates who can no longer access them can turn to heroin use, Barry said, since it's available and relatively cheap. Mathis said people building up a tolerance to pills also can lead to heroin use.

Prior to the press conference, Mathis said many of the same problems that lead to issues from eating disorders to suicides are covered when talking about drug abuse. "All of it is born out of the same thing," Mathis said. "People are finding it hard to live in their skin and we have to ask the question of how can we help people feel comfortable? How can we stop them before they get on the path of self-destruction?" Mathis said people who are now struggling from heroin or opioid addiction can call 203-354-6901 or e-mailing [stopaddictionnow@liberationprograms.org](mailto:stopaddictionnow@liberationprograms.org) for immediate help.