

A new alliance in the fight against opioid addiction

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MONTGOMERY TWP. >> Hardly a day goes by in Montgomery Township district court when Judge Andrea Hudak Duffy doesn't encounter a person addicted to heroin or some other opioid standing before her. They're usually there for an arraignment, or a preliminary hearing. A drug possession case, or a driving under the influence case, or for committing a retail theft or other crime in order to feed their all-consuming need for narcotics.

Most times, that person expresses to Duffy a desire to seek treatment for their addiction. Sometimes they say it calmly, a quiet cry for help. Other times it's not so quiet — sobbing and shaking and frantically begging the judge, or anyone, for help. Sometimes it's not the person themselves asking for aid and support, it's family members or friends in the courtroom who are visibly distraught, frustrated and dispirited as they implore Duffy for help on behalf of their loved one.

And even if people are silent in court, unwilling to admit to the judge or themselves that they have a problem and need treatment, none are happy about their opioid dependence. Mostly, they've given up hope, all but surrendered to a relentless addiction that seems impossible to overcome, especially if they've tried and tried again to beat it and failed.

Day after day, hour after hour, Duffy stands witness to all of this, happening in a community in a county in a state in a country that's in the grips of a worsening opioid crisis — an epidemic that's crashed into every neighborhood like a tsunami, where no one is insulated from harm regardless of race or age or economic standing or anything else.

And yet, in the face of what seems like an insurmountable catastrophe, Duffy — like many others in the area — has not given up hope that this crisis can be attacked, that it can be slowed down and beaten back, that a tiny dent can lead to a bigger dent that could, someday, reverse the tide.

“We have to save lives, and I truly believe we can start to conquer things one patient at a time, one issue at a time, and maybe we can make a difference in our little corner of the world,” Duffy said inside her court on a recent afternoon during a short break between cases, her words flush with ardor and urgency. “We have to try. We have to.”

That mission has manifested itself in the Drug Addiction Resource Alliance (DARA) — a new collective of local and Montgomery County agencies and facilities involved in different aspects of drug treatment all brought together by Duffy to work in conjunction with one another and offer a lifeline to individuals and families suffering the calamity of opioid addiction.

At least a dozen of those resources will be present at the inaugural DARA community forum being held at the Montgomery Township municipal building, located at 1001 Stump Road, on Thursday, Nov. 17 beginning at 7 p.m.

Among the many agencies or facilities that will have tables at the forum are Eagleville Hospital, Gaudenzia Addiction Treatment and Recovery, Penn Foundation, Hope's Therapeutic Services, Rehab After Work/School, Valley Forge Medical Center, Keystone Center, and The Horsham Clinic.

Duffy calls it "one-stop shopping" under one roof where addicts or the families and friends of addicts can speak one-on-one with representatives from the participating agencies and get real, tangible, useful information about how and where to get help.

"This is not just for people who have been criminally charged," Duffy stressed. "This is for anyone and everyone in our community who is dealing with drug addiction."

And to emphasize the point that opioid addiction can touch anyone, one of the scheduled speakers at the forum is retired Hatfield Township police Lt. Ray Wilson, whose son, Michael, died of a heroin overdose last year, Duffy said. It will be the first time Wilson is speaking publicly about his family's tragedy — a loss that deeply affected Duffy and made the formation of DARA even more of a priority.

DARA exists because Duffy is keenly aware that the usual way of connecting addicts with resources isn't working all that effectively or efficiently. For as dedicated as various individual providers are to helping addicts, oftentimes one agency or facility isn't up to date on what other area providers offer or the full range of resources available throughout the region. So, for example, someone who calls a particular agency might get information about the availability of inpatient treatment, but not about the assessment process, or about how to pay for any of it.

But by creating a network of providers all communicating and working in conjunction with one another so that they know all of the resources and opportunities out there — which treatment facilities have added more beds, what new types of insurance or funding streams are available, which agencies have expanded their transportation or mobile assessment programs, and so forth — each provider can better serve the people who contact them by being able to address issues and questions in a more comprehensive way.

And by holding these community forums — Duffy says that the Nov. 17 gathering is intended to be the first in a series of such events — DARA is directly connecting the people who need help to the people who can help them, which Duffy believes is far more helpful than merely giving someone a pamphlet or directing them to a website and expecting them to navigate the maze of resources by themselves.

"This local, team approach could make a real difference and isn't often tried," Duffy said. "We're going to see if this idea can really work for the addict."

Cathy Messina of Drug Addiction oVerdose Education, Inc. (DAVE) — a non-profit agency that distributes free kits containing Narcan, an opioid overdose antidote, and will have a table at the forum — called DARA a "very forward approach" with which her group is happy to partner.

“Judge Duffy’s initiative recognizes that a different approach is needed to support individuals who are dealing with the opioid crisis on a personal level,” Messina said. “She has seen from her bench that the forming of an alliance among various stakeholders will break down barriers to education and care for those in need” in Montgomery Township and Hatfield Township, Messina added.

Montgomery County District Attorney Kevin Steele, whose office is also part of the DARA collective, voiced his strong support of the alliance as well. “The heroin and opioid problem in Montgomery County is an epidemic, and it’s destroying families who frequently don’t know their son, daughter or loved one is addicted to heroin until they are arrested,” Steele said. “We are aggressively attacking this problem on many, many fronts, and Judge Duffy’s efforts in connecting families and resources to battle addiction is a welcome addition to the fight.”

That fight, of course, is an incredible difficult one, and even for those so deeply invested in winning it, sometimes victory is hard to see with all the barriers in the way. Duffy knows that DARA isn’t a panacea — she’s all-too-aware that resources are limited, that demand for inpatient beds has surpassed the supply even as treatment facilities rush to expand their physical space, and that there are very real financial obstacles making it tough for some people to get the help they need.

“I’ve sat up here trying to get people inpatient beds and I know the frustration that I experience,” she said. “So if I’m experiencing it, I can only imagine how much worse it is for the average person who has no clue about the system.”

Still, Duffy said, “I believe that even the worst-case scenario can be helped” — and with tears welling in her eyes she gestured toward a folder full of letters from people in recovery who have written to her over the years thanking her for helping them when all seemed lost.

“Every day I see people, they come in here, and their families have abandoned them because they have frustrated them beyond measure, so they have no family support, they have no money, they’re homeless,” Duffy said. “They have nowhere to go. They’re shooting up in their cars, or in motel rooms. They feel hopeless. It’s rough, it’s really rough...but that doesn’t mean it’s not possible. Despite realistic issues, I really think that with diligent efforts and persistence you can find a bed for someone, you can get them the help they need.”

And DARA now exists because for Duffy, doing nothing, or trying to solve the problem the same old ineffective ways, simply isn’t an option.

“It’s the right combination of people working together that sometimes makes all the difference in the world,” she said.