

Women: the face of the opioid crisis

Taped across the headboard of a four-poster bed are a child's crayon drawings, which all repeat the words "I love you, Mommy."

The bed and drawings belong to a female patient of Sunshine Lady House Mental Health Wellness and Recovery, a program of the Rappahannock Area Community Services Board (RACSB) that is dedicated to rehabilitating individuals struggling with mental illness or substance abuse.

Under the supervision of John Butler, crisis stabilization coordinator, the program has worked to help women in the wake of a nationwide opioid epidemic. Over the past 18 years, the rate of opioid pain reliever (OPR) use has dramatically risen in the United States, and has severely impacted women in Fredericksburg, Va., and elsewhere.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 42,000 people died in 2016 from an overdose of opioids, include prescription drugs, heroin and fentanyl. That number, which accounts for 66 percent of all drug overdose deaths that year, is five times higher than in 1999. On average, 115 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose, or nearly five every hour, according to the CDC.

CDC records indicate that opioid abuse is a growing problem among women in the United States. More than five times as many women died from prescription painkiller overdoses in 2010 as in 1999, according to the CDC, which asserts that opioids affect women in different ways than men.

For example, women are more likely to have chronic pain, be prescribed prescription painkillers and use them for longer time periods than men. The opioid crisis in the United States has significantly affected women, with the CDC reporting that women from the ages 55-64 have experienced the largest increase in accidental opioid overdose deaths.

As this opioid addiction has stretched across the nation, members of the Fredericksburg community have felt the effects of the epidemic. Many organizations in the city provide programs which offer resources for individuals trying to recover from addiction. One of these programs is Sunshine Lady House.

Sunshine Lady House is actively fighting opioid abuse in Fredericksburg by providing community members recovery in its 12-bed residential facility. With a \$2 million donation from Doris Buffett, wealthy local philanthropist, in 2007, Sunshine Lady House became a part of the Fredericksburg community. The house has served as the home for RACSB's Crisis Stabilization Program since its start and has helped 24 women with opioid addiction in the past 12 months, according to RACSB's records.

The home provides patients up to 15 days of free treatment filled with therapeutic options for recovery such as individual counseling, therapeutic arts or acupuncture, to name a few. Female patients struggling with opioid addiction can also seek counseling next door, where RACSB's main office is located.

Working toward custody

Sunshine Lady House isn't the only resource RACSB provides to Fredericksburg women. Next door, Substance Abuse Program Coordinator Patricia Bischoff spends her time in her corner office helping women struggling with opioid abuse.

In her five and a half years at RACSB, Bischoff has witnessed the barriers women face when struggling with addiction. While a majority of her time is spent finding ways to fund patients' treatment, she also works with a variety of RACSB services designed specifically for women struggling with opioid abuse.

"One resource we provide is Project Link," Bischoff said. "It is designed for pregnant women with opioid abuse in their lives. That entire program is dedicated to serving just women."

Project Link offers a valuable service to women in Fredericksburg whose children are in the foster care system because of their parent's addiction. With no fees required and confidentially guaranteed, the program provides a variety of resources to pregnant or parenting women. A few of the resources include transportation assistance to abuse treatment and support group meetings, instruction on child-care and positive parenting techniques and educational materials regarding pregnancy and parenting.

According to a Free Lance-Star article, in the fall of 2017, Spotsylvania County's Department of Social Services began looking closely at records of children being placed into foster care. Of the 114 children entered into the foster system in July 2017 59 (52 percent) had substance abuse by a caregiver as the reason for removal from their home. Of those cases, 22 involved a caretaker abusing opioids.

While battling addiction, these parents will also struggle to prove they are healthy and responsible enough to have custody of their children returned to them - and they don't have much time to do that. Under a federally established timeline, parents have 11 months to show the court they've changed their behaviors and can provide a stable, drug-free home for children who have been placed in foster care. Absent that, they can lose custody of their children forever. The catch is that recovering from addiction is a complex and strenuous process, one that often takes longer than 11 months.

"Relapse is part of recovery," said Butler, the crisis stabilization coordinator at Sunshine Lady House. "Substance addiction is so, so difficult. It's a long process."

Home over healing

Unfortunately, while the numbers of women struggling with opioid addiction are rising, the numbers of women who complete treatment at RACSB specifically for opioid addiction have remained low. Of the 75 individuals who have participated in RACSB's Medication Assistance

Teaching service, or MAT, only two women have completed the program, Bischoff said. It's a demanding program that includes individual and group counseling, drug screens and medication management, and family obligations can complicate women's participation, she said.

Project Link and MAT both require a significant amount of time, and many women can't balance the commitments of healing and home.

"MAT is an intensive program," Bischoff said. "Patients come to counseling twice a week, every day for dosing, and have to see a doctor once a week. I think that deters women who have obligations with their children."

One factor that prevents women from completing programs is childcare. According to Bischoff, most women either don't have sufficient funds to pay for childcare or don't have family members who can step in and babysit. In addition to lack of funds, many women feel obligated to stay at home with their families.

"It is really hard for women," Butler commented. "The barrier is family. I've heard a lot of reasoning for women not finishing treatment and a majority involve their family. 'My kids need me, my kids miss me, I've got to cook for my husband . . . ' There is this myriad of things, but you can see why they are leaving . . . it's family."

While men certainly struggle with opioid addiction, the implications are different for women. Women are not only dealing with addiction but are actively being held back from overcoming their addiction because of the traditional gender roles present in their lives.

"Women have different demands than men, for sure," Bischoff said. "They are everything to everybody: the children, the husband, the wife. That's why they can't finish treatment. The demands at home are too much, and they put their families before themselves."

Finding hope

While the opioid epidemic still holds a strong presence in Fredericksburg, so does RACSB.

Over the past year, RACSB has provided help to 485 women struggling with substance abuse. While these women may not finish treatment because of the barriers they face as mothers and wives, they at least have a local resource that provides them the opportunity to begin their path to recovery.

For more information regarding RACSB resources, please contact the Fredericksburg office at 540-373-3223.