

Laconia officer armed with cellphone makes difference in heroin battle

Police program aims to give lifeline to those struggling with addiction



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LACONIA, N.H. —

As communities across New Hampshire struggle to contain the state's opioid crisis, one Laconia police officer with a cellphone and a lot of compassion is making a difference.

Experts have long said that decriminalizing drug addiction and offering treatment over jail is the only solution. The Laconia Police Department has been testing that theory for a year and seeing some positive results.

Zack Brown is serving time at the Belknap County Jail. He can't see his son, doesn't have a job and said he wrestles with his addiction every day.

"As soon as I started using needles, I wasn't taking no for not getting high," Brown said. "I was willing to do some pretty crazy things."

Brown said he's a lucky man for a number of reasons. He could be in prison on a much longer sentence, he could be dead or he could still be ravaged by withdrawal symptoms. He credits his mother with getting him help.

"I don't know who she talked to down there, but she said to talk to Officer Adams, and he'll help me, and I was skeptical," Brown said. "Police have never been my friends in the past."

Officer Eric Adams is taking on the heroin crisis and winning. His key tool is a flip phone that he answers any time of the day or night, every day of the week.

"You stay on the phone. You keep talking to them," Adams said. "You keep telling them that, 'You can make it.'"

The city of 18,000 has racked up close to 100 overdose calls so far this year. Six were fatal. Adams said it was clear the status quo wasn't working.

"If you're just going to an OD and you're not offering any resources to these people and you're just getting them up to the hospital or they refuse and you walk away, you're going to be back there in a few hours for another OD," he said.

The Laconia Police Department's advocacy and intervention position was the brainchild of the police chief. It's only a year old, but it's already so successful that it's on track for national certification. Several police departments across New Hampshire are trying to model it.

The concept is simple, but Adams said it's difficult to replicate. What makes it work in Laconia is Adams, who's part big brother, part advocate and part coach.

"I'm kind of like that thorn in their side that won't go away," Adams said. "You've got to be compassionate. You've got to show that you care."

Tammy, a Laconia resident, said she's trying to hold things together for her children and fiancé. She said that when she's not sure she has the strength or the right answers, she calls Adams.

"It's the energy he puts off. It's the positivity," she said. "He doesn't look at you like you're an addict or you're a problem. He looks at you like there's a promising future for you."

"I don't claim to be a social worker. I'm not," Adams said. "I'm just a human being that cares."

Adams said addiction recovery can be achieved outpatient. He said it's cheaper and more immediate.

"It's not always about the beds, and I want New Hampshire to make sure they understand that," Adams said.

In a few weeks, Brown hopes to be out of jail and reclaiming his life, starting with his 1-year-old son.

"I am glad to be clean and sober and be able to feel love and happiness and give it back," Brown said. "So we're going to stay on that track."