

Taking Charge of the Opioid Epidemic

Drug overdoses have become the leading cause of death nationwide for people under the age of 50. Not illness, accidents or violence. Drug overdose.

In Illinois, opioid overdoses have killed nearly 11,000 people since 2008. In 2016 alone, nearly 1,900 people died of overdoses. That is almost twice the number of fatal car and motor vehicle accidents that year.

Ellen and Lowell Mennenga's son Robb struggled with addiction for decades, but lost his life in 2017 to a drug-induced homicide. The Mennenga's, who live in Savoy, Illinois, now tell their story of addiction and loss at schools, church groups and community forums.

Mrs. Mennenga says their main goal now is to educate and save lives by sharing Robb's story.

"We think that we need to spread that people need to understand that addiction is a disease," she said. "It's a horrible disease. It's a disease like cancer. It's a disease like anything else, and we just try to save lives."

The Mennengas were part of a panel for a recent healthy workplace event at Danville Area Community College. The forum, which was put on by OSF HealthCare Sacred Heart Medical Center in Danville, focused on opioids, their prevalence and impact, as well as pathways forward.

According to Dr. Vincent Kucich, Vice President and Chief Medical Officer at OSF Sacred Heart, employers can be a first line of defense for people struggling with opioid addiction.

"The population we are speaking about are people that are actively employed, and this does affect their performance. At the same time also people are paying more attention to their employees, there are wellness programs, and identifying again, people who are at risk, people who are at use, and they are referring them to the appropriate areas for help," explained Dr. Kucich.

In 2017, the Council of Economic Advisers released a report estimating that the economic cost of the opioid crisis was \$504 billion in 2015.

According to an analysis from the Kaiser Family Foundation, which tracked the impact of the opioid epidemic on those with employer-based health coverage, the annual cost of treating addiction and overdose increased by more than eight-fold between 2004 and 2016.

While employers may face challenges in addressing this crisis, creating awareness in the workplace and taking proactive steps can lead to a healthier and safer work environment for all employees.

"Identification of the individuals at risk is the first step in our journey to help out these folks and to prevent them from going down in the wrong direction," said Dr. Kucich.

While awareness and community education is key, panelists reminded the crowd that access to these drugs also needs to be addressed. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports United States pharmacies dispensed 191 million opioid prescriptions in 2017.

Dr. Kucich says a legal, well-intentioned prescription given to someone who then abuses it or is dependent on it elevates that patient's risk of abusing heroin by 40 times.

"Many people have chronic pain in many different forms of manifestation. They might not be taking any prescription drugs from you, but they may be using drugs from other family members. So I think ascertaining that is important. Identifying people at risk, or people who are involved," explained Dr. Kucich. He continued, "At the same time, and we do this at OSF in our monthly meeting with the chief medical officers and the chief nursing officers. We very carefully look at the amount of opioids that we prescribe to make sure we are doing it in a very careful manner, an appropriate manner, and then we also explore other methods of pain relief that do not necessarily require drug therapy."

OSF HealthCare Sacred Heart Medical Center also launched a service to help those struggling with addiction. OSF Sacred Heart has partnered with [Evergreen Healthcare Partners](#) to offer the StepOne ServiceSM.

The StepOne ServiceSM is a hospital-based service available for adults struggling with addiction and withdrawal symptoms. It starts with an inpatient stay, but participants will get the support they need throughout their journey, including an individual discharge plan to help the individual stay on a path to success.

The goal of the StepOne ServiceSM is to help get participants started on a path free of their substance use disorders. To qualify, individuals must be in the process of withdrawal and must voluntarily start the service.

StepOne ServiceSM candidates can call OSF Sacred Heart (217) 443-5000, ext. 8401. They will be screened by a StepOne ServiceSM staff member to determine the nature of their health status prior to admission.

From there, medical professionals will use a proactive approach to treatment, to alleviate the most intense symptoms of withdrawal. These symptoms are often the major obstacles to successful treatment when an individual seeks help in an outpatient setting.