

IV drug use recovery coordinator hopes to help addicts

By DENEEN SMITH dsmith@kenoshanews.com Sep 15, 2017



Patti Hansen is the IV drug user recovery coordinator for the Kenosha Human Development Services.
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Drug overdose is the leading cause of accidental death in Kenosha County, with deaths from heroin and related drugs like fentanyl leading the way.

Beyond the deaths from heroin and other drugs, addiction takes troubling tolls on people's lives in Kenosha, from families broken by addiction to property crimes fueled by addicts needing cash.

Patti Hansen is on the front line of the county's battle to address the problem. She coordinates recovery programs for IV-drug users for the Kenosha Human Development Services.

It is her job to meet with people in crisis after an overdose, to help drug users create recovery plans, to link addicts and their family members to resources in the community, and to lead groups of people in recovery programs.

Hansen has been in the field of addiction counseling for six years and in her current role for KHDS for three years.

Hansen has personal experience with the pain caused by addiction; her brother died three years ago of a morphine overdose.

Q. What do you think people's biggest misconception is about drug addiction?

A. They don't think it will hit their family. I think a misconception is that people chose to be an addict, that it is not a disease. They chose to use, but nobody ever smokes their first joint or drinks their first beer and says, "Man I can't wait until this takes over my life and I lose everything and can't control my bladder." Nobody wants to be an addict. When you talk to people who are struggling with this, they say, 'I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy.'"

Q. What makes people vulnerable to addiction?

A. My experience is that the vast majority of people who struggle with addiction also have mental health issues that haven't been addressed. It's a common thing in my field that you have to address substance abuse and mental health issues together or it's not going to help. And a lot of people don't realize they have a mental health issue until they start dealing with the addiction. It might be depression; it might be anxiety.

I also find that people have a lack of human connections. Addiction can be a cause of that lack of connection, of human emotional connection, because addicts drive people away. But I think it can be a cause of addiction too. Mental health and addiction go hand in hand; trauma and addiction go hand in hand, and trauma disconnects us. There are so many things that can cause disconnection — feeling like you are different at school, feeling like people are picking on you, like you haven't found a place to fit in. Even technology disconnects us. I just find lack of connection is very apparent in so many of the people I work with.

Q. What makes people come to you for help?

A. A lot of the crisis calls I follow up with are after an overdose. But people come at all different stages. Some people are desperate; they are desperate and are looking for something to fix themselves. When you talk to someone who was in active addiction, it rules their lives. You get up in the morning and you are thinking about it; it totally consumes your life. That can often lead then to criminal things — retail theft, stealing from families, selling things they steal or their own things. They'll sell a TV that is worth \$200 for \$40 because they need that hit. Which is why people lose family members, they lose children, they lose their homes, their cars, their jobs. Everything.

Q. What do you want people to know?

A. That there are resources in Kenosha County. No, we don't have an in-patient treatment center in Kenosha, but we have a lot of other valuable resources that can and do work. Among those resources are the Care Center, Oxford House, a Vivitrol program, 12-step programs, SMART Recovery programs, recovery coaches, Bridges, the AIDS Resource Center, group counseling. (Hansen leads group counseling at different locations four to five days a week.) Many of these programs are free. My services are free.

Q. What keeps you hopeful?

A. The success I see in people I work with. Just because someone isn't in recovery yet doesn't mean they are not working toward it. Even little changes are hopeful. If three months ago they weren't getting services and now they are getting mental health services, even if they are still using, it's progress. Any little change that people are able to make toward recovery gives me hope.

Q. What do you say to people who believe government-funded addiction programs, and medication like Narcan, are a waste of resources?

A. I see people say, "Why waste money on this?" Well, because these are human beings. We are working with human beings. These people are so much more than just an addict, every single one of them.

Patti Hansen can be reached at 262-657-7188

The Kenosha County Mental Health and Substance Abuse Resource Center can be reached by calling 262-657-7188 or 1-800-236-7188. Ask for the Resource Center.