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By Benjamin Schachtman

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The opioid epidemic facing our country, state, and local neighborhoods is proving to be an extraordinary opponent, but the community stakeholders in New Hanover County and the City of Wilmington are rising to the call and fighting back.

RHA has had the opportunity over the past several months to participate in a multitude of initiatives to combat this health crisis and we are honored to work alongside a host of others dedicated to serving. Projects such as the LEAD project, the Quick Response Team pilot, medication drop off sites, and community forums are designed to make a difference in the lives of those affected by opiate misuse.

Whether it is first responders, city or county officials, educators, or behavioral health providers, everyone comes to the table as an equal partner possessing knowledge, expertise, and compassion with a common goal of making a difference.

Leaders in this effort include professionals and citizens who have looked past artificial boundaries and are banding together around several strategies aimed at creating a healthier, more informed community. SEAHEC is leading the charge with increasing awareness and educating the public through pulling people from all layers of community groups.



“Since Wilmington was named #1 in the nation for opioid abuse, I’ve often said, I’m so sad we’re here, but I’m so glad we’re here. I’m sad, that my home, that is usually recognized for our beautiful beaches, our historic Riverwalk, and the amazing people who live and work here is instead being recognized for this epidemic. But I’m glad we’re here because it is through that recognition that the right people are coming together, making real changes that will save lives, build a stronger region, and make our community a better place.”

-Olivia Herndon Director Continuing Education- Operations/Outreach Director



Local agencies are working together to address the opioid epidemic through the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD)[®] program. Both the Wilmington Police Department and New Hanover County Sheriff’s Department have been instrumental in this pre-arrest diversion effort for those who are users of opioids by providing assistance in finding drug intervention resources.

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Written by-Kathy Smith, Ph.D. Chief Operating Officer RHA Health Services, Behavioral Health and Debra Vuocolo, Vice President RHA Health Services, Behavioral Health Eastern Region



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The Opioid Crisis
One Community Fights Back



Robert Childs, MPH also participated in the Opioid Task Force as well as many of the other initiatives. He is with the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition’s (NCHRC), and oversees the agency’s operations and innovation. Robert Childs and NCHRC specializes in syringe exchange, harm reduction, drug policy reform, and community based overdose prevention utilizing naloxone.



The ultimate goal is for people to move toward recovery. In this effort, providers have also moved beyond competition for business and are partnering to provide easier access to services. “Kenny House, LCAS and Clinical Director with Coastal Horizons shares, ‘We focus on the prevention of and treatment for opioid dependence, so our services must be accessible and able to reach and respond to the need that is out there.’ Coastal Horizons and RHA are working hand in hand to build capacity and develop treatment opportunities.



The Quick Response Team pilot project (QRT), is a project led by the City of Wilmington and their Legislative Affairs Director Tony McEwen. It is modeled after a program in Colerain, Ohio, which is reporting early positive results and targets those accessing treatment after experiencing an overdose. A medical, legal, and treatment partnership response is focused on successfully linking people with on-going treatment rather than providing medical crisis stabilization alone, incarceration, institutionalization, or hospitalization. Much of the support comes in the form of eliminating barriers to treatment such as transportation, linking to medical treatment, quick access to services, and follow-up.

Because of the efforts of SEAHEC, Wilmington Police Department, the New Hanover County Sheriffs department, Coastal Horizons, RHA Health Services Behavioral Health, and many, many others, Wilmington and the larger New Hanover County are hoping to implement a similar program. Currently, a proposal has been submitted to request funding from the state. Early signs are positive for successful passing of this bill. Regardless of that specific outcome, the future is hopeful as a community movement has gained momentum in Wilmington and New Hanover County. This on-going movement can only lead to success in decreasing the adverse outcomes of the opioid crisis and the creation of an even stronger and healthier community.

“I am just continually surprised at how much notoriety the Quick Response Team Pilot Project is getting across the state.”- Tony McEwen, Legislative Affairs Director, City of Wilmington

“While working so closely with public health is not something law enforcement typically does, working in collaboration with so many different disciplines has accelerated the pace of change we need and this epidemic demands.”

*-Deputy Chief Mitch Cunningham Investigative Bureau
Wilmington Police Department*

“We need to recognize, respond and educate all community partners in our efforts to stem opioid abuse and prevent further addiction and death of our citizens.”

*-Travis Robinson New Hanover County Deputy
Sheriff, Lieutenant*

“This project has had my heart. I am humbled to be sitting at the table.”

*-Debra Vuocolo RHA Health Services, Behavioral
Health Eastern Region Vice President*



Opioid Task Force

L-R Front Travis Robinson, Molly Daughtry, Deb Vuocolo, Kathy Smith, Olivia Herdon, Tony McEwen; Back Kenny House, Antonio Roper, Mitch Cunningham (Robert Childs not pictured)

“ This story is all about the team work we have experienced and the solutions we have produced as a group. I personally have been humbled by everyone’s willingness to come to the table asking the question “How can I help? How can I serve?” ”

*-Kathy Smith, Ph.D.
Chief Operating Officer
RHA Health Services, Behavioral Health*