

Battling Opiate Addiction, One Call At A Time

A mere 25 miles from the St. Louis Arch lies St. Charles County; a 592-square-mile community of nearly 400,000 with a rich history of its own. Nestled along the Missouri River, the city of St. Charles served as Missouri's first State Capitol, and as the final embarkation point of Lewis and Clark's expedition. Fast forward two centuries, and the county boasts the highest median household income in the state, unemployment is well below the national average and several municipalities have made *Money* magazine's annual "Best Places to Live" list. Despite all these positives, St. Charles County, like thousands of other communities across the nation, is facing a serious health epidemic: heroin and prescription opioids.

St. Charles County Ambulance District (SCCAD) covers all municipalities and unincorporated



St. Charles County Paramedic Lisa Cassidy

areas of the County. In recent years, the district's paramedics have seen a dramatic increase in heroin and opioid overdose call volume.

"If we go back just under a decade to 2008, our volume for these types of calls was under 200 per year," said Paramedic Lisa Cassidy, the driving force behind SCCAD's #StopHeroin initiative. "It grew steadily over the next six years, spiked dramatically in 2015, and has since grown further. Last year, crews responded to 606 overdose calls throughout the County."

Cassidy and several colleagues began talking in 2016 about how the district may be able to inform residents just how serious the issue had become. What began as an idea to wear special shirts with the message "#StopHeroin" has evolved into a robust, multi-pronged effort aimed not only at awareness, but intervention for those struggling with addiction.

First on the agenda for Cassidy was engaging with the County's anti-heroin task force, CRUSH (Community Resources United to Stop Heroin). The group, comprised of representatives from school districts, treatment providers, the prosecuting attorney's office, and others, was thankful to have paramedic representation, as they recognized that these individuals were the ones on the front line of the epidemic.

Concurrently, the district worked to develop a series of infographics that were used individually on social media, and compiled onto a single page in the Summer 2016 edition of "Pulse Points," SCCAD's quarterly newsletter. The simplistic imagery utilized caught the attention of the CRUSH group, who opted to utilize the material for their handouts, and even on a billboard along Interstate 70.

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Lights, Camera, Action

CRUSH's flagship project is the county's annual Teen Drug Summit - a gathering of approximately 500 sixth, seventh and eighth grade students each November. Students selected represent every public school district in the county, as well as many parochial schools. Cassidy pitched the idea of showing the students a raw, firsthand look at an overdose call. Some were initially apprehensive, but ultimately, the group decided that this would be a powerful takeaway for the students present; one that would get them talking with their friends back at school.

Cassidy solicited the assistance of SCCAD colleague Adam Hermann, who shot and produced a video that opens with audio of an actual 911 call, then transitions to a re-enactment of paramedics administering naloxone and attempting [unsuccessfully] to revive the patient; all while his mother and brother look on. St. Charles County Police Department officers and students in the theatre arts program at St. Charles Community College also participated in the project.

The video is part of a larger presentation developed for the Teen Drug Summit. Other topics covered include opioids' physiological effects on the body, why individuals make the leap from pills to heroin, and video interviews with paramedics, law enforcement and parents discussing the emotional toll that these calls take on all involved. The presentation drew strong reviews from students, teachers and parents present at the summit; with many inquiring if SCCAD would be willing to present the material at their school, civic organization, church group, etc.

Willing was an understatement for Cassidy, who has given dozens #StopHeroin presentations, reaching thousands of individuals. For adult groups, she presents in tandem with SCCAD Director of Community Relations Kyle Gaines, who leverages established relationships with chambers of commerce, rotary clubs, Kiwanis and other community organizations to seek

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additional opportunities to get in front of audiences with this material. Critical Care Paramedic Ashley Pease assists with youth presentations. Organizations interested in scheduling a presentation for their group need simply call the ambulance district; no minimum number of attendees is required.

Bringing Mobile Integrated Health Into The Fold

For EMS providers, heroin and opioid overdose calls can be extremely frustrating. Unappreciative patients, complicated bystander dynamics and a host of other less-than-ideal variables may present themselves on calls of this nature. Often, patients do not want to go to the hospital, leaving paramedics in the difficult position of obtaining a refusal from someone whom they know may use again. Regardless of whether those successfully resuscitated agree to go to the emergency department, they are rarely linked with treatment resources in their community.

With this in mind, Cassidy and Assistant Chief Dave Lewis set out

to develop a system of follow-up for patients successfully revived by SCCAD. The pair worked closely to secure agreements with in-patient and out-patient treatment partners Preferred Family Healthcare, Center Pointe Hospital, Crider Center and Bridgeway Counseling. Each of these agencies specializes in different areas, and several have agreed to guarantee beds to SCCAD-referred patients, regardless of individuals' ability to pay. St. Louis-based National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, also, has lent invaluable insight into the development of the follow-up program, dubbed the Substance Use Recovery Response Team, or SURRT.

At the time of an overdose call, paramedics will, as always, recommend that the patient go to the emergency department for further observation and treatment. If the patient refuses, he/she will be offered an intra-muscular dose of naloxone as a precautionary measure. All opioid overdose patients, regardless of whether they agree to transport or the second dose of naloxone, will be provided a packet of treatment resources available to them.



St. Charles County Paramedics Lisa Cassidy and Ashley Pease present at the Teen Drug Summit.

Included in the packet is a release form, authorizing the attending paramedic to share the patient's information with Cassidy and/or the district's other mobile integrated health (MIH) paramedics. If the individual

agrees, a specially-trained MIH paramedic will arrange a follow-up appointment in 24-48 hours to discuss treatment options in more detail. Also included on the release form are spaces for the patient to authorize SCCAD to speak with family members; the goal being that they would have a supportive individual present at the time of treatment discussion.

SURRT went into action last spring, and patients immediately took interest. Between March 1, 2017, and June 30, 2018, 256 (55.2 percent) individuals consented to SURRT paramedic follow-up, while 208 refused. (Data set includes only overdose

patients who were awake and oriented, not those who were unconscious or did not survive.) Of the 256 who agreed to a follow-up conversation, 159 (62.1 percent) ultimately met with an assessment counselor to facilitate entry into treatment.

“Will every patient agree to seek treatment? Of course not,” Cassidy states candidly. “But continuing to obtain refusals will do nothing but keep us on the path we’ve been on. This is an epidemic on which we need to work collaboratively if we want to see meaningful change.”

Following the initial success of the SURRT initiative, St. Louis-based National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse [NCADA] reached out to SCCAD to discuss the possibility of adding another component to its efforts to curb the opiate epidemic: public Narcan distribution.

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Following internal discussions and board of director approval, the District began said distribution in July 2017 in collaboration with NCADA. Narcan available through the program is purchased not with taxpayer dollars, but via MOhope grant that NCADA was awarded. Any resident of St. Charles County may come to any SCCAD station to receive two free doses of the drug, that can reverse the effects of an opiate overdose. Paramedics also carry the Narcan kits on their ambulances, and provide them to family members as part of the SURRT discussion.

To date, more than 150 Narcan kits have been distributed, and several have been used to save patients' lives during overdose situations.

The Future

With SURRT performing strongly and requests for #StopHeroin presentations coming in regularly, SCCAD is cautiously optimistic about the future. Thus far in 2018, responses for opiate overdoses are pacing even with 2017 – a statistic that may not sound positive, but is encouraging considering that year-over-year opiate overdose volume has grown by double-digit percentages in recent years.

“We’re proud of the cohesive program we’ve put together over the past two years, but ultimately, time will tell if these efforts lead to sustained reduction in responses for prescription opioid and heroin overdoses,” said Chief Taz Meyer. “Perhaps the most encouraging sign at this point is the fact that now more than ever, our community is more willing to admit that there is an issue and is willing to discuss it. We still have more work to do, but even as recently as three years ago, that open dialogue simply was not present in St. Charles County.”

*As Director of Community Relations for St. Charles County Ambulance District, **Kyle Gaines** oversees public safety programs, community engagement efforts and media relations. Since joining the SCCAD team in 2008, Kyle has worked to develop and deepen the district's ties to organizations of all types in St. Charles County.*



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