

Maine Voices: Coalition led by Mercy Hospital will tackle opiate addiction crisis head-on

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In 2015, Mercy Hospital announced [the changes affecting the Westbrook-based Mercy Recovery Center](#), and many people looked to me for my opinion.

My voice on this matter was important to them, given that I have been a longtime member of the Mercy board of trustees as well as a longtime supporter of the outstanding programs and care that the Recovery Center provided. I'm also the parent of a child who at one time received care at the Recovery Center.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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“How could Mercy, of all hospitals, walk away from the Recovery Center?” I was asked. “Has Mercy abandoned its mission?” Rest assured, the commitment to the Mercy mission is solid.

As we are all well aware, addiction – to opiates and heroin, in particular – is ravaging our state, stressing our health care systems and robbing us of our loved ones.

It is for precisely this reason that I am so proud of the important work Mercy has been leading – especially in light of the necessary refocusing of services provided by the Recovery Center – to truly provide care for those who are struggling to recover.

The Mercy clinicians and behavioral health experts came to the realization some time ago that while alcoholism and the detoxification process could pose a true acute health crisis requiring hospitalization, opiate addiction could be treated effectively outside of a hospital setting (such as had been provided at the Recovery Center).

It was this revelation that led to a marvelous coalition of forces in Portland. This new coalition, the Greater Portland Addiction Collaborative, is being led by Mercy Hospital and will tackle the opiate addiction epidemic head-on. I am proud to be part of an organization such as Mercy that has chosen to be a steward of such a noble cause, and I am even prouder to be part of a community that has chosen to support it.

Our partners are Amistad, Maine Medical Center, the city of Portland, the Portland Police Department, the Opportunity Alliance, Preble Street Resource Center, Community Housing of Maine, Catholic Charities, the Milestone Foundation, Portland Community Health Center and the Portland Recovery Community Center. They have chosen to work together to truly make a difference in our community.

The model is so simple that it's brilliant. It combines existing resources within the community, thus eliminating the waste and duplication of effort that would otherwise exist if these agencies were not sharing in this new model of care. It leverages law enforcement, street outreach and peer support workers.

This innovative model will also provide access to treatment of a variety of addiction disorders in an outpatient setting, safe and sober housing, recovery support and access to primary care and mental health services.

The Greater Portland Addiction Collaborative is trying to secure funding for startup and a three-year pilot program.

Upon securing funding, the coalition will begin with 100 people: the approximate number of individuals who are now seeking treatment in our community and who have been turned away each month from the Milestone Foundation.

By creating a payment source for individuals who are currently uninsured, the expansion of Medicaid by the Maine Legislature would assist in funding this project. Eleven percent of patients cared for by the Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems emergency room staff are uninsured, and nearly one-third of these patients present to the emergency room for substance abuse-related health challenges. While expansion would not cover all the expenses for the continuum of recovery, it would be an important step in the right direction.

As the data is analyzed, the program will be expanded and shared with other communities as a replicable model.

The state is watching this collaborative closely, so it is no surprise it has also attracted the attention of Maine's congressional delegation.

So yes, I am proud to confirm Mercy's mission and its commitment to patients and families struggling to overcome addiction have never been stronger.

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