

Guest column

United Way agencies leading addiction fight

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This guest column was submitted by
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Recently, I had the opportunity to attend the first South Central Opioid Summit, organized by Monroe County government officials. Hundreds came together to discuss the epidemic that has gripped our community, like so many across the nation. Monroe County saw the worst in recent months as a rash of overdoses from heroin and synthetic marijuana dominated headlines. The count one day reached 15.

Indiana's Department of Children's Services reports that addiction-related removals from homes have tripled between 2010 and 2014. Our local Big Brothers Big Sisters cite that 43 percent of kids need Big matches because of drug misuse tearing up families.

Event attendees heard from many people in recovery, reminding us of the potential for progress. Every person there wondered, "What more can I, can we, be doing?" I felt heartened to think of the areas in which our United Way and network of member agencies lead the way.

When we think of addiction and needs for support around it, there are three distinct phases: prevention, intervention and recovery.

Prevention provides individuals of all ages opportunities to explore interests and passions, reach their academic potential, learn relevant job and financial management skills and develop healthy relationships.

United Way has long led the community in early childhood education, high school graduation and financial stability. Efforts in these areas guide families toward positive educational and financial outcomes so that desperation does not take hold as easily. Our member agencies further stabilize families by ensuring access to after-school tutoring and mentoring programs, healthy food, preventive care, affordable mental health services and housing assistance. Last year alone, member agencies provided mental health services at low- or no-cost to 1,087 people, 64 percent of them children. A total of 716 households accessed rent, mortgage and utilities assistance so they could stay in their homes.

Intervention requires a network in our community that is well-coordinated. Many United Way member agencies work together to provide hot meals, shelter or family support and employ professional case managers who can help individuals find the right help when it's needed. For those struggling with addiction, that may include inpatient or outpatient services. United Way partner Amethyst House provided such services to 80 individuals last year, with 94 percent reporting improved mental health and wellness.

Recovery is rooted in creating a new way of life. When a person struggling with addiction learns to live sober, they can better focus on reshaping their life when they can meet their basic needs. Our partners play a part by offering key essentials: nutritious meals and pantry items, transportation, legal services, sliding-scale child care, employment supports and a sense of community and confidence.

So to answer the question of that day: "Can I, can we, do more?"

Absolutely, and no one sector, agency or individual can do it alone. People without hope, without opportunity for a better life are more vulnerable to addiction. We are stronger and healthier when we work together to improve the quality of life for every person in our community.

As we kick off the United Way campaign this year, I ask that you join the fight for a community that is not only resilient against the larger forces at play, but also one which responds swiftly and effectively when a neighbor needs it, and one which deeply supports recovery from addiction or other trauma. Let's fight side by side so that everyone has the opportunity for a safe and healthy life.

When united we fight, united we win!

To join the fight, visit www.monroeunitedway.org.