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How University at Buffalo is trying to meet the need for addictions workers

Jon Harris

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UB awaits approval on new master's program

As more treatment programs come online in Western New York amid the opioid epidemic, Dr. Nancy H. Nielsen agrees the need is there.

But she does have one major concern – a serious workforce shortage in the area of substance abuse treatment.

"We don't have a workforce to staff the beds that we have now and the outpatient clinics that we have now," said Nielsen, clinical care chair of the University at Buffalo's Clinical and Research Institute on Addictions. "That is perhaps the most serious problem."

Turnover in the industry is high – a November 2021 report from the Rockefeller Institute of Government noted New York providers reported 44% of counselors and 38% of support staff turned over every one to three years. It is the kind of environment that emerges in a field with comparatively low pay and a workload that has never been higher.

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Nielsen, also senior associate dean for health policy in UB's Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, says all educational institutions need to play a role to help build the workforce.

What UB is doing

David Herzberg, education chair of the Clinical and Research Institute on Addictions and a history professor, said institutions, such as major universities, sometimes can be "slow-moving big ships."

That means it can take a while to redirect them to respond to a problem such as the desperate need to grow the substance use disorder workforce.

"Some of that turning of the big ship is taking place at UB," he said.

What he means: Herzberg, along with a steering committee of experts from various schools at UB, developed a new master's degree program in addiction studies, which will have a couple different academic tracks – one on science and research, and

another on society and politics. Herzberg and UB are hoping for approval soon from the state Education Department so they can begin training students. And that complements UB's existing training offerings and expertise.

For example, the university already offers a minor in addiction studies, which requires 18 credit hours and draws on medical, humanities, legal and social sciences experts, among others. All told, UB has more than 150 faculty members and scientists investigating addiction.

In addition, Herzberg noted, there is a program in the UB School of Social Work run by clinical assistant professor Todd Sage that guides students toward Credentialed Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselor (CASAC) certification.

If and when the master's program is approved, Herzberg said he'll go into "high gear on fundraising," because he wants to find existing peer counselors already working in the field and provide them the opportunity to earn a credential and, as a result, higher pay. (Peer counselors are those with lived experience who provide support in a patient's treatment and recovery.)

"It's really important that we don't crowd out this workforce that has absolutely unique expertise," Herzberg said. "And in producing these people with degrees, we need to make sure that we are having these programs be open to people with that lived experience, so that we don't lose this hard-won, incredibly important social resource that has really made a difference in how we've been able to handle this emergency."

'Crazy scary right now'

As UB works to grow the addictions workforce, the latest overdose numbers for Erie County are "crazy scary right now," said Cheryll Moore, a medical care administrator at the Erie County Department of Health who leads the county's Opiate Epidemic Task Force.

In fact, the county hit an all-time high on total drug overdose deaths last year with 379, which included 306 confirmed opioid-related overdoses, according to figures presented at the task force's May 1 meeting at Erie Community College's North Campus. Of those 306 opioid overdoses, 284 were fentanyl related.

While the opioid figures are concerning, the county also is seeing an increase in the number of overdose deaths that are not associated with opioids, Erie County Health Commissioner Dr. Gale Burstein noted. More than 70 of the 379 overdose deaths last year, or about 19%, were not opioid related. In 2016, for instance, only 7% of overdose deaths were not opioid related.

The county had been able to get total drug overdose deaths down to 207, which included 156 opioid-related overdoses, in 2019. But deaths have been climbing ever since the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

Through April 28, the county has recorded 145 overdose deaths in 2023, including 51 confirmed opioid-related overdoses.

At the meeting, Moore encouraged the task force by reminding them they had been able to bring down the overdoses in the past, and they can do it again.

"It's scary what we're seeing today," Moore said. "We need to regroup."

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I'm a Genesee County native and Syracuse University grad who covered business at the (Binghamton) Press & Sun-Bulletin and at The Morning Call in Allentown, Pennsylvania. I joined The Buffalo News in September 2021, covering the business of health care.
