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Well Sense Health Plan hosts crucial discussion about the impact of opioid addiction on children

Manchester – Behind almost every adult struggling with opioid addiction is a child whose young life is immediately impacted and future success is at risk. Yet, little public discussion has focused on the children. That critical dialogue began last week with a panelist of speakers representing many voices of the opioid epidemic, who came together at a town hall forum hosted by Well Sense Health Plan.

The forum, which was moderated by Well Sense’s Executive Director, Lisabritt Solsky, included powerful and heartfelt accounts from family members impacted by addiction, as well as advice from experts who work on the front lines with children and families.

Panelists included Joanne Peterson, Founder and Executive Director at [Learn to Cope Inc.](#); Molly Hill, Program Manager at [Court Appointed Special Advocates \(CASA\)](#); Marj Droppa, Phd at [Keene Family YMCA](#) in the Monadnock Region; Rebecca Woitkowski, Early Childhood Policy Coordinator at [New Futures](#); Kerry Norton, Program Director, at [Hope on Haven Hill](#) and Dawn Landry, a community member who shared her personal story about raising her young grandson and helping her daughter recover from this disease.

The panelists outlined several key areas of concern and gave hope of what individuals and communities can do to help.

Foremost, the impact on children’s safety and long-term well-being is paramount. “There are cries for help from children experiencing the opioid epidemic across all regions,” said Marj Droppa of the Keene Family YMCA who has explored how the opioid crisis is impacting children, families, police, advocates and grandparents raising grandchildren in the Monadnock Region. “I am grateful the conversation today is focused on the children”, said Molly Hill, of CASA. “They are there during drug raids, car accidents where they are in the backseat, and in houses where overdoses are taking place.”

The impact of these experiences robs children of a happy and healthy childhood. For infants and toddlers, there’s a lack of basic care, neglect, health issues and development delays. Teenagers fall behind or do not attend school and often experience substance abuse themselves. Children of all ages face physical and sexual abuse and many become homeless. “Child development specialists have produced decades of research showing that the environment of a child’s earliest years can have effects that last a lifetime,” according to the Urban Child Institute.



What communities can do, agreed the panelists, is to advocate for policies that help keep children safe and make treatment available to parents. They can support grandparents raising grandchildren and stop the stigma and “hatred” towards those battling this disease.

Public stigma creates a road block to recovery for the adults, and puts their children at risk. Adults are afraid to seek treatment for fear of harsh judgment, loss of employment, or fear of losing their child. They need to be able to access treatment the moment they ask for it, that very day. One solution is Boston Medical Center’s [Faster Paths to Treatment](#), a judgement-free home that provides urgent care to those with substance use disorder. Other programs include [Hope on Haven Hill](#), a substance abuse treatment program, including a residential program for pregnant or new Moms who can live at the homes with their babies. “I am proud of the women who ask for help,” said the home’s Program Director, Kerry Norton. “And pregnancy is a very motivating time to ask.”

Emotional support from others can also help make families stronger. Unlike cancer, addiction is not a disease where neighbors deliver a casserole dish, noted one panelist. Communities can build support groups and offer families a place to meet.

For those concerned about the economic impact to communities, panelists and attendees had a clear message: if you care about your wallet, the cost of not helping is higher. When adults recover and become employed, only then will they be paying taxes.

Finally, there’s a gap in data collection showing the number of children and families affected, and what treatment they have received. “Data isn’t being collected because we don’t invest in data collection the way we should,” noted Marj Droppa. Data, she said, is critical to implementing policies that can change lives in sustainable ways.

About Well Sense Health Plan

Well Sense Health Plan is the largest managed care organization in New Hampshire, serving low income, under-served individuals, age 0 to 64, through the state’s Medicaid program. Well Sense is the trade name in New Hampshire for Boston Medical Center Health Plan, Inc., which was founded by Boston Medical Center in 1997 as a not-for-profit managed care organization in Massachusetts. For more information, go to www.wellsense.org.

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