

Community Comment – May 23rd, 2016
By Jon Sapper
Heroin and Methamphetamine Abuse in Humboldt County

Heroin and methamphetamine abuse and addiction in Humboldt County is well chronicled. I applaud the current efforts to develop a unified community response to address this complex and challenging issue. Many individuals and groups have been meeting to better understand the disease of addiction and appropriate community responses. We may be close to having those discussions becoming fruitful.

What is known, is the staggering financial and emotional toll that drug abuse and addiction has on individuals, families and communities; and we all pay for it in one way or another. In trying to understand this disease better, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, stated more than a decade ago;

Addiction affects brain circuits, including those involved with reward, motivation, learning, memory, and self-control. That is why addiction is a brain disease. Some individuals are more vulnerable to becoming addicted based on genetics and multiple environmental factors. While a person initially chooses to take drugs, over time the effects on the brain compromise that ability to choose, and taking the drug becomes compulsive, beyond the person's self-control or willpower. A drug abusing lifestyle also substantially increases risk for other mental and physical health issues.

Treatment isn't simple. Yes, it must help the individual stop using drugs and achieve productive functioning in the family, at work, and in society; but because addiction is a disease, most people cannot simply stop using drugs for a few days and be cured. Patients typically require long-term care to maintain a drug free lifestyle.

The research is compelling. If we want to reduce the damage done in our communities resulting from drug abuse and addiction, there is a pathway forward. Research proven strategies within a connected system of detox services, residential and outpatient programs, and after care/sober living is clearly needed.

In Humboldt County, these components are currently fractionalized, not easily accessed, not well-connected and most of them have little or no medical intervention and monitoring that is necessary throughout the recovery process. It will cost money to do this. But the important question is, "What is it costing us now by not addressing it?" As one recovering addict stated, "There aren't many quality residential treatment programs in Humboldt County. You can go to a sober living home, but in many of them, you can get whatever kind of drug you want."

There's a lot of work to do, but I think we're on the right track.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.