

New Option Planned for Substance Abuse Recovery in Calais

By Lura Jackson

Facing the problem of substance abuse is never an easy thing, particularly when it affects oneself or one's family or friends. In recognition of how difficult recovery can be—especially to those attempting it in isolation—a program that deliberately builds a powerful and effective support network has been designed. Known as "Groups", the program aims to help people "recover

together."

Groups began in New Hampshire two years ago in response to the opiate epidemic, and it has since opened offices elsewhere in Maine and Ohio. It relies on medication-assisted recovery through Suboxone in addition to weekly group meetings with other recovering individuals. The success and participation rate is impressive: After six months at Groups, 95 percent of patients attend group

counseling each week and 85 percent are totally abstinent from opiates.

"We're working with people in the environments they're in," Don Kent, clinical director of Groups. "They're practicing their skills in real life and real time." After coming in for a weekly meeting, the patient receives approval for a week of Suboxone.

Before being accepted to the program, there is an initial assessment process with a counselor and a physician to determine if the program would be a good fit for the individual. Treatment includes random drug tests, and random pill counts. "It's not about 'Gotcha, we caught you doing something wrong', it's about safety," Kent said. Like similar drugs of its type, taking Suboxone while supplementing with other drugs can cause serious side effects.

If some doesn't clear their

drug test, they aren't out of options, Kent stressed. "If someone gets kicked out due to taking [unauthorized] drugs, we attempt to refer them elsewhere. If we can't find alternatives, we take them back in 30 days," he said.

"If you know anything about substance abuse recovery, you know it doesn't work the first time," Kent said. "We encourage them to continue to try." Kent knows a thing or two about recovery as he himself has been recovering from alcohol addiction for the past three decades. "The way that you get there is a day at a time."

As a private organization funded by private entities, Groups is able to move quickly into areas it has identified as hotspots, opening as rapidly as within six weeks. "Our goal is to be aggressive and to help as many people as possible," Kent said. The

demand in Maine has been substantial. When Groups opened in Rockland on June 9th, they admitted 26 people on the first day. In less than two months, they had 100 people there. At 200 patients, Auburn is the largest office in the system, with some clients coming from Houlton.

"The saddest thing about the opiate epidemic is that there are so little options for treatment available," Kent said.

Not only is Groups popular, it has demonstrated repeated success on various levels. "We've stabilized people effectively and they're now able to be more productive in their communities," Kent said. Other measures of success can be seen in qualitative measures. "We look for people who are going back to work, people who have clean drug screens and renewed relationships with family."

There are a few challenges to those seeking help from Groups—one is that the program does not yet take insurance. "When you take insurance, it requires a fleet of people," Kent explained, though he said that it would be a possibility for the future. The goal remains to make the program as affordable as possible. The cost for participating is \$65 a week (separate from the cost of the Suboxone). There is no cash or drugs kept in the office itself. Only credit, debit, or M.O.s are accepted as payment.

One of the critical components of the program will be its ability to work with local physicians who are willing and able to prescribe Suboxone. Kent said that Groups is willing to work with doctors individually to complete the required 8-hour training. Apart from doctors, Groups will also be hiring counselors and a clinic manager.

At present, Groups aims to open at 23 Washington Street (by the DMV). Kent says the building has a "perfect configuration" and there is space in the back to build out if more room is required. The number of patients that the program can accommodate is fully flexible, with more groups created depending on need.

To find out more about Groups, go to joingroups.com or call 800-683-8313.

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