



Dealing with the Rural Opioid Epidemic

OFBF Priority Issue: *Opiate addiction has become an epidemic in our state, harming families and impeding workforce development for employers. Ohio Farm Bureau will continue to seek funding and community support to battle opiate addiction that includes programs that focus on housing, employment, treatment, medication and methods to reduce relapse, as well as enforcement of laws and protections for rural residents and their property.*

Focusing on the Issue

Opioids are driving the nation's growing drug addiction and overdose statistics. The class of narcotics include prescription medications such as Percocet, OxyContin and Vicodin; illegal drugs such as heroin and powerful synthetics including fentanyl. While many associate drug addiction issues with urban centers, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) see rates rising fastest in states with large rural populations.

There are no quick and easy solutions to the issue. Opioid use disorder (OUD), the medical term for addiction to opioid pain medications, doesn't discriminate. Ohioans regardless of age, income and social status find themselves in the grip of addiction.

Addiction for many begins innocently enough. Many are prescribed pain medications after an injury or surgery to help them return to normal activity. In many cases, carelessly or improperly taking medication supplied in a standard 100-tablet prescription is seen as a gateway to drug addiction. What begins with taking medication for relief of physical pain can quickly lead to needing additional doses to address the pain of opiate withdraw. As prescription resources diminish, many seek additional painkilling drugs illegally.

Ohio is seen as an epicenter of the opioid epidemic. Earlier this decade, many in the grip of addiction went to "pill mills" in many areas of the state to obtain prescriptions without questions. As state lawmakers cracked down pill mills, many turned to heroin. Given these developments, the state has been hard hit and consistently ranks at the top of overdose death statistics.

Creating Strategies to Address Impacts of Addiction

Many rural counties are creating strategies and looking for additional resources to combat the effects of the epidemic. Community support could include special job &

family services program options to help those addicted and their immediate families. Special counseling, health, treatment and alternative pain management methods are being explored. Local government with community stakeholders to enhance crime prevention and economic development initiatives to ensure that rural neighborhoods continue to move forward.

Experts in health care and social services are urging many community groups to get involved in combating the issue. Stakeholders looking to join these efforts should consider the following:

A working definition of addiction - The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) defines *addiction* as a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors.

Addiction is characterized by inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response. Like other chronic diseases, addiction involves cycles of relapse and remission. Without treatment or engagement in recovery activities, addiction is progressive and can result in disability or premature death.

Consequently, there are no simple remedies to opiate addiction. Long term, aggressive treatments and strategies will be needed to help many for decades to come.

- *Understanding the scope of the issue* - There are very few folks who have not known someone personally impacted by the effects of opiate addiction. If they have not been impacted directly, many have seen family members, school classmates, employees, workmates, friends and neighbors are effected. It's time to set aside the stigma of drug abuse – This issue is not centered in an urban neighborhood several hours away; it's here.
- *Working with medical and mental health service providers* – Community stakeholders in rural areas are working with healthcare providers to establish programs and services that provide alternatives to pain management other than drugs. Physical and massage therapy hold promise. Moreover primary care providers are being equipped to identify and treat for addiction, as well as provide addiction counseling.
- *Group efforts provide benefits* – Many experts agree that social interaction, networking and outreach are effective strategies to combat the individual and societal impacts of addiction. Many county Farm Bureaus are working with 4-H and FFA, social services and law enforcement to create education and prevention programs.

Discussion Questions

1. How close are you to the issue? Briefly discuss with group members how people you know have been personally impacted by opiate addiction issue in your county. How long ago have your council members seen this trend developing in the community?
2. How would you describe the general understanding of *addiction* among members of your community? Do people see *addiction* as something that should be fixed easily, or is it seen as something that needs to be addressed long term? Is the general understanding in your community remaining the same, or changing?
3. What programs do you feel need to be established for the person having an addiction problem, as well as for families, employers and others in the community?
4. List community stakeholders (service organizations, business leaders, local officials, etc.) your group would like to see contacted by the county Farm Bureau to work with on this issue.
5. How do your group members want to work with county Farm Bureau leadership to get further involved in addressing opiate addiction issues on the local level?