

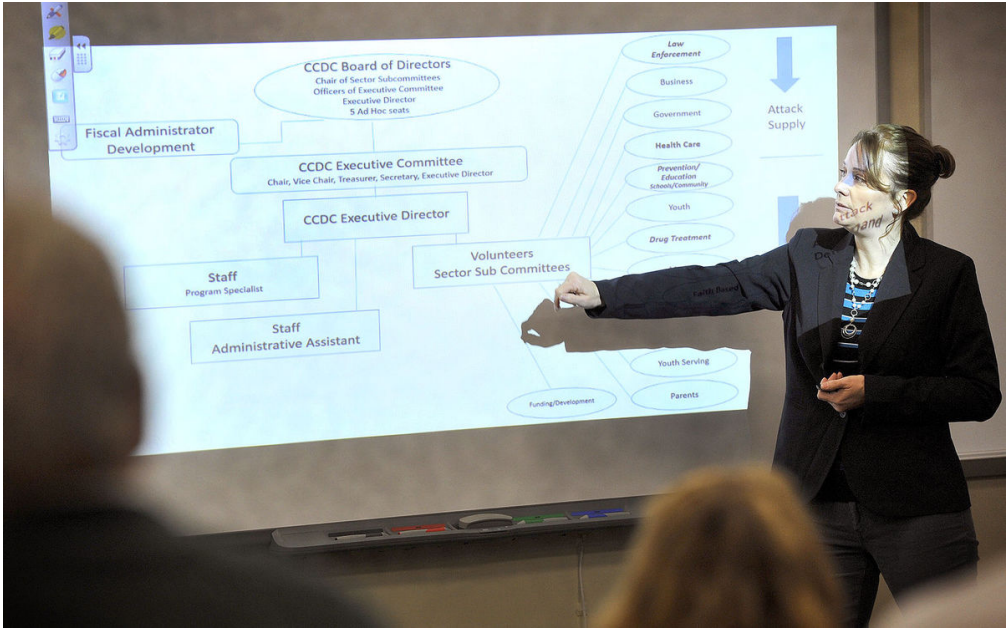
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FEATURED

Fighting drug epidemic will take a ‘we’ response, Johnstown coalition leader says

By Randy Griffith
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Ronna Yablonski, executive director of the newly formed Cambria County Drug Coalition, breaks down the board of directors pyramid while speaking about the coalition’s goals and objectives on Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2017, at Penn Highlands Community College in Richland Township.



The opioid epidemic affects everyone and will require community solutions, Ronna Yablonski told members of Johnstown Area Regional Industries’ health care consortium on Tuesday.

“We want them to understand the state of affairs is: Drug addiction is a ‘we’ issue and it will take a ‘we’ response,” Yablonski said following her presentation on the Cambria County Drug Coalition’s efforts to facilitate collaborative response.

Yablonski is executive director of the coalition she said was formed to bring together existing programs and develop new resources to battle the epidemic.

“This coalition was formed bring everybody together and not to close anyone’s shop,” she said at the JARI health care consortium meeting in Pennsylvania Highlands Community College in Richland Township.

“We are really trying to be a hub for the county.”

Businesses can play a part by supporting the coalition or specific components of the unified response, she said.

They can also help by recognizing drug addiction is affecting all social classes and neighborhoods. Experts are encouraging businesses to re-examine their “drug-free workplace” policies to include more help for employees struggling with recovery.

Yablonski recommended information from Commonwealth Prevention Alliance Campaign to Stop Opiate Abuse.

"People tend to be more successful in addiction treatment that's encouraged by employers than treatment urged by friends and family," the prevention alliance says on its website, pastop.org.

Many area businesses are already offering employee assistance programs that include those recovering from addiction, said Debi Blalog, JARI's director of workforce development.

Tuesday's event was planned to help JARI member businesses join the fight against drug abuse, she said.

"What can we do to address the issues we are facing with drugs?" Blalog said. "We need a capable workforce. Many of the job candidates are not able to pass the pre-screening drug test."

Yablonski said Cambria County Drug Coalition has identified a continuum of areas involved in fighting the opioid epidemic: law enforcement, health care, education, prevention, treatment and the media.

She highlighted some local efforts in the battle along each component of the continuum.

Law enforcement continues to press forward, to make heroin and other opioids less available and more expensive.

"We don't want it to be easy for (drug dealers) to do business here," Yablonski said.

Conemaugh Health System is working to develop a "warm handoff" system to assure follow-up care for those seeking emergency room care after overdoses or other drug-related health problems.

Its Regional Intensive Care Nursery is also working on new approaches to help expectant mothers who are addicts, she said.

On the education front, all Cambria County schools are using the nationally recognized Botvin LifeSkills Training curriculum.

Many coalition participants have been exploring ways to expand treatment options for addicts in Cambria County.

"There are not enough beds," Yablonski said. "Cambria County has zero detox beds and no short-term treatment program."

Although there has been discussion about starting a new program locally, Yablonski said most of the discussion has been focused on bringing satellite clinics from established programs to Cambria County.

"These are gigantic needs," Yablonski said.

Randy Griffith is a multimedia reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. He can be reached at 532-5057. Follow him on Twitter @PhotoGriffer57.

Drug awareness forums scheduled

More Information

- www.cambriacountydrugtaskforce.org
- pastop.org

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