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## Diverse groups being brought together in fight

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JOHNSTOWN — As the opioids problem intensified and spread into the small communities and rural areas of Cambria County, agencies began rolling out programs to address the growing epidemic.

Schools, health-care agencies, social services, businesses and law-enforcement communities were attacking the scourge on different fronts.

Nothing seemed to be making a dent, so leaders began looking for a way to join forces.

A united effort was launched with formation of the Cambria County Drug Coalition in September 2016, with Ronna Yablonski serving as executive director.

“There are already several entities working on the problem of drug abuse in our region,” Kelly Callihan, district attorney for Cambria County, said at the time. “The coalition will allow us to coordinate and expand their efforts as we work to address this growing problem through prevention, law enforcement and treatment.”

The 1889 Foundation, United Way of the Laurel Highlands, Lee Foundation and Community Foundation for the Alleghenies provided funding to support the new approach that involved agencies and organizations from all sectors of the community.

“They felt like like they needed to do something different,” Yablonski said. “Even among themselves, they felt like it was a tidal wave they just couldn’t rise above.”

Agencies represented at the first planning sessions included Cambria County's drug task force, prevention coalition, transit authority, drug and alcohol commission and the district attorney's, coroner's and county commissioners' offices.

They were joined by representatives of the Girl Scouts of America, 1889 Foundation, Johnstown Police Department, Central Cambria School District, United Way, Conemaugh Health System, Mainline Pharmacies and Alliance Medical Services of Johnstown.

The new alliance developed a website, [www.cambriacountydrugcoalition.org](http://www.cambriacountydrugcoalition.org), to communicate events and share information about related programs. Partnerships with local media outlets were formed, and a new column series — "Coalition Corner" — was recently launched in The Tribune-Democrat to help educate the community on the group's work.

The Cambria County Drug Coalition has focused its efforts in four areas: improving care and treatment, fostering education and prevention, reducing the drug supply and obtaining funding to continue the response.

"All sectors of the community were feeling the effect," Yablonski said. "This approach is a lot different. It's purposeful, aligned action."

Coalition leaders identified the nationally recognized Drug Free Communities program to develop a local model, Yablonski said.

"There was not one comprehensive plan," she said. "This model brings all these different sectors into an organized structure."

The opioid epidemic sweeping the nation has been severe in Cambria and Somerset counties, and the response has presented challenges never seen before. Cambria is among the state's leaders annually in fatal overdoses per capita.

"Law enforcement is being asked to become providers and administer (overdose antidote) Narcan," Yablonski said, noting that in 2017 police gave Narcan to 63 overdose patients, saving 60 lives in the county.

"That's different. Never in history has that been part of the job," she said.

On the health care front, emergency room doctors, neonatal staff and pain management professional are receiving additional training.

The evidence-based Botvin LifeSkills program has been introduced as a prevention tool in school districts across the county, and the Conemaugh Valley Ministerium brought in the Living Free seminar to help community leaders, teachers, parents and others learn to deal with addicts and those affected by addiction.

An educated, understanding community can grow into a support circle for others dealing with the same troubles, Grace Brethren Church Pastor Rick Horner said.

“We are making sure people can find the information they need to get the help they need,” Yablonski said.

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