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TOP STORY

## Greene County volunteer coalition pushes back against opioid epidemic

By Mike Tony, for the Greene County Messenger Jul 13, 2018 Updated Jul 13, 2018



The Rev. Richard Berkey is pastor at Rolling Meadows Church of God in Waynesburg, where the Coalition for a Brighter Greene meets. Berkey said the coalition works to save one life and one family at a time amid Greene County's opioid crisis. (Photo by Mike Tony)

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On Oct. 8, 2015, several hundred residents, law enforcement officers and other representatives packed the Greene County Courthouse for a standing-room-only town hall meeting focused on saving the rural county from its worsening epidemic of drug and alcohol addiction.

"It was the first time I saw the county stand up and say, 'We have to do something,'" Greene County resident Jonathan Johnson said.

But while the town hall acknowledged the problem, several attendees left frustrated at what they felt was a lack of planning offered at the meeting to address it.

So the Coalition for a Brighter Greene was formed.

An all-volunteer organization of community residents, the coalition has worked to alleviate drug abuse rampant in Greene County since its formation following the town hall.

It sponsored the addiction-focused March for Greene, which on a rainy day in May 2016 attracted approximately 1,400 marchers through Waynesburg, some who displayed signs indicating they'd lost loved ones to drugs.

It installed a substance-abuse prevention program called Botvin LifeSkills Training at all five school districts in the county for grades 3 through 9.

It is working with Steps Inside, a Waynesburg-based recovery club, to set up a hotline for those in need of addiction help.

And it's also targeting societal side effects of addiction.

The coalition is in the process of establishing an independent Court Appointed Special Advocate program to train and recruit volunteers to help Greene County courts make informed decisions on abused and abandoned children who come before the courts for service and placement.

The coalition is working with Greene County courts and school superintendents to establish a volunteer truancy mediation program designed to reverse the effects of absenteeism by encouraging communication between parents and school personnel and address issues impacting school attendance.

Rolling Meadows Church of God in Waynesburg hosts the coalition's monthly board and committee meetings in Waynesburg. The church's pastor, Rev. Richard Berkey, served as the coalition's president from its inception until May and lamented that there are no detoxification facilities for addicts seeking recovery in Greene County. Berkey added that there have been very few Greene County-based recovery options for residents.

One of the most rural counties in Pennsylvania, Greene has been hit just as hard as more populous areas throughout the state. Greene County ranked sixth statewide in number of drug-related overdose deaths per 100,000 people with 14 in 2015 and ninth with 19 in 2016, according to a 2017 report by the Drug Enforcement Administration Philadelphia Division and the University of Pittsburgh.

Kari Diamond joined the coalition after her son's father fatally overdosed in Feb. 2017.

"I just wanted to do something," Diamond said.

Johnson, Berkey's successor as coalition president, said that addicts often think they're too broken to be saved.

The coalition aims to dispel that notion, Berkey said, by saving one life and one family at a time.

Coalition member Tom Schlosser offered that the opposite of addiction is community.

"I think that's what we're trying to do," Schlosser said.



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