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FEATURED

Levine: Addiction is not a 'moral failure'

By Randy Griffith
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Ronna Yablonsky, Cambria County Drug Task Force executive director, greets Dr. Rachel Levine, secretary of health, at the Pennsylvania Opioid Crisis and Prevention forum Wednesday at University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown.

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Addressing the opioid crisis gripping the state and nation requires a multifaceted approach, beginning with understanding the core issue, the state's top doctor told University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown students on Wednesday.

"Addiction is a medical condition. It is not a moral failure," Dr. Rachel Levine, secretary of health, said during Pennsylvania Opioid Crisis and prevention forum in the John P. Murtha Center for Public Service and National Competitiveness.

Levine outlined the state's response to the crisis as part of a panel of experts assembled by juniors and seniors in the educational law class under Ray Wrabley, political science professor and chairman of social sciences and business enterprise divisions at Pitt Johnstown.

Other speakers included Ronna Yablonski, Cambria County Drug Coalition executive director, Amy Arcurio, Greater Johnstown School District superintendent, Amy Snyder, Glendale School District teacher and Botvin LifeSkills facilitator, Fred Oliveros, Cambria County Drug and Alcohol Program administrator and Jason Riligio, recovery work group chairman for the drug task force.

The state's three-pillar approach to the opioid crisis is showing results, Levine said. The focus on prevention, rescue and treatment, has continued to reduce the number of overdose deaths since 2017, she said.

Levine gave a brief history of what she says led to the current situation, using her oft-repeated label as a "perfect storm."

It began when the medical community began an emphasis on treatment of acute and chronic pain, which evolved into an attempt to eradicate pain for all patients.

That was about the time the pharmaceutical industry rolled out stronger opioids said to be non-addictive to pain patients. They included Oxycontin. The claim was based on limited studies that turned out to be wrong, Levine said.

Finally, there was an influx of cheap, powerful heroin that patients turned to when the prescription drugs became difficult to obtain.

"You put those factors together and it exploded into the opioid crisis," she said.