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Prosecutor's office's reimagined community justice plays major role in lowering overdose death rates in Athens County

Rate of overdose deaths dropping in Athens County

Prosecutor Keller Blackburn has implemented groundbreaking programs to address issue

ATHENS, Ohio – While the drug epidemic remains a concern in the nation and the state of Ohio, programs in Athens County have worked successfully and consistently to drop the rate of overdose deaths in the county.

[The Athens County Prosecutor's Office](http://www.athenscountyprosecutor.org) has played a major role in that success. In 2014, Prosecutor Keller Blackburn began implementing groundbreaking programs that would reimagine community justice. At the time, Athens County ranked 20th in the state in terms of age-adjusted rate of unintentional overdose deaths over the course of five years, according to the Ohio Department of Health.

In 2019, Athens County improved to being ranked 81st in Ohio, with only seven counties having a lower five-year age-adjusted rate of unintentional overdose deaths.

“The programs that the Athens County Prosecutor’s Office have launched have been very important,” said Dr. Joe Gay, former executive director of Health Recovery Services. “The fact that Blackburn has people in treatment is a protective factor. Plus, it assists them in recovery. The fact that he requires them to get treatment as well as medication increases their chance of recovery. It’s an effective program.”

Gay said the Community Justice programs are an important piece of the county’s efforts to reduce drug overdose deaths.

“There are clear indications from data that drug supply is a significant factor in determining the severity of the problem. (Prosecutor Blackburn’s) intensive work to interdict the drug supply undoubtedly has

contributed to lowering the death rate,” Gay said. “His broader efforts to bring attention to the program and to the problem have really increased community awareness of the problem.”

The Community Justice program is made up of several arms, including:

- Vivitrol
- Cognitive Behavior Therapy
- Athens County Empowerment (A.C.E.)
- Parent Support Group
- Preventure
- Working Recovery

“We’ve made massive improvements in our programs to help people if they get into trouble, help them before they get into trouble and to help make our community better,” Blackburn said. “With the support of many organizations in the county, we’ve been progressive in addressing drug addiction and attacking a major issue of crime. The reimagining of our Community Justice initiatives has worked in Athens County.”

Blackburn said that even one overdose death is too many but that the prosecutor’s office’s programs gives offenders and those who misuse drugs a chance at a fresh start.

“Pre-trial incarceration is sometimes necessary for public safety. Sometimes it’s necessary for the safety of individuals. For those who misuse drugs, sometimes incarceration gives them the chance to reset and clear their minds and we use that as an opportunity to treat as well, then we attempt to move people from incarceration to treatment even before adjudication of their case.” Blackburn said. “We’re trying to take drugs off the street, take addicts away from the dealers and dealers away from addicts, and we’re trying to stop new people from becoming addicted.”

Following is a detailed outline of the elements of the Community Justice program.

Vivitrol

Blackburn started the Vivitrol program in Athens County in 2015 — the first of its kind in the country. Vivitrol (Naltrexone) was created in the 1970s and blocks the flow of dopamine to the brain, thus rendering the high from heroin useless. More so, it clears the mind and eliminates the desire to misuse drugs.

The program provides added intensive support for clients undergoing counseling and medicated treatment for 12 to 36 months on a case-by-case basis. Being that it is based with the prosecutor’s office, it can serve defendants, witnesses and community members without the need for criminal charges or time constraints of other criminal justice programs.

“People have said that all they would think about before bed was how they were going to get their fix in the morning. When they got up, they’d get their fix and then think about what they were going to do to not be sick all day. Vivitrol takes that off the board,” Program Director Reuben Kittle added. “You don’t have that mental thought of chasing that high so you don’t get sick.”

Cary Losey and Bryan Darst both say their lives were saved due in part to the Athens County Prosecutor’s Office.

Losey was the first graduate of the Vivitrol program. She was indicted after the prosecutor's office brought down a major drug ring in the Glouster area. Losey's addiction problems caused her to lie, cheat and steal from just about everyone she knew. It also destroyed her marriage and made her estranged from her sons. For a long time, Losey did not recognize nor like the person she saw in a mirror. Now, she sees herself again.

"I'm extremely grateful for everyone in the prosecutor's office," she said. "Keep up the good work because there are more out there like me that just require a little help."

Darst said Vivitrol was his insurance policy.

"If going to my recovery meetings wasn't working, talking to my sponsor wasn't working, doing all the things I was supposed to wouldn't work, I'd always have the Vivitrol to fall back on because I knew that even if I did use, I wouldn't feel the effects," he said. "It was my failsafe. If all else fails, that wouldn't."

Darst had stints in his life where he was able to overcome addiction but relapses followed those stretches. Since entering the Vivitrol program, Darst has been sober for nearly five years.

Through encouragement from Filar, he also started working as a peer counselor for Integrated Services and now helps others through recovery at Mike's Bridge House.

"I've said it a million times, I couldn't be more grateful, thankful, appreciative of everything the prosecutor's office has done for me and the opportunities they gave me to change my life. I hope I can continue to give back to the community and help any way that I can."

The Athens County Prosecutor's Office's Vivitrol program has since been adopted in Texas and other counties in Ohio have adapted portions of it for their own uses. The program was also featured in a [2018 paper from the National District Attorney's Association](#).

Cognitive Behavior Therapy

The Cognitive Behavior Therapy program stands on its own but can be used with the Vivitrol program. It's an intensive counseling program designed to change the way a person thinks about addiction. The deep therapy techniques explore the mindset around addiction and get to the root of why drugs become a coping mechanism.

"We have an addiction problem in this country. The drug of choice has been in a transition from opiates to methamphetamine over the past few years. We are also experiencing fentanyl-laced speed drugs," Blackburn said. "We are trying to provide the services to help people heal and live a health-successful life."

"Cognitive Behavior Therapy is a way of rewiring your brain and decision-making," added Kittle.

Kittle explained that effective counseling factors into how well clients adapt to not only the Vivitrol program but also recovery in general. Case reviews are held periodically and, based on conversations with counselors and individuals, recommendations of increase in care, maintenance or discontinuation can be made.

“At the end of the day, we want people to be able to participate in their community and not have to be a drain on society. When they can contribute, they feel their value and that’s the goal of the program,” Kittle said.

Athens County Empowerment (A.C.E.)

Athens County Empowerment (A.C.E.) serves as the diversion arm of the Community Justice program in the prosecutor’s office.

“A lot of prosecutors have diversion but we didn’t want ours to be just so someone could get away with a felony if they didn’t break the law for a couple of years. We want to actually deal with the causes of the crime and also build community pride,” Blackburn said. “A lot of people in A.C.E. are in one of our drug treatment programs and some are furthering their education.”

Over the years, Ohio has changed the way offenders are incarcerated making it less likely to be held on pre-trial bonds and less likely for low-level offenders to be held pending trial. The presumption of a prison sentence for low-level felony offenders is also gone. These factors contribute to greater numbers of supervision for probation officers. With A.C.E., an offender undergoes an intensive supervision program for 1-3 years (with most falling in the two-year range) with the goal of addressing the underlying causes of the crime committed. Generally, a 50 percent success rate is admirable for diversion. In 2019, the A.C.E. program saw a success rate of 88 percent.

In order to enter the program, a guilty plea is made but held in abeyance. This plea only goes into effect should the offender not be able to complete the diversion.

“There’s no loss to a victim in a case or to society. We’re giving offenders a chance and if they’re successful, that’s outstanding. If they fail, their guilty plea goes into effect and they’re sentenced,” Blackburn said. “It’s intense. It’s real and we’re trying to help people. If we can reduce the number of felonies in the county from what was over 600 to just 300 now, taxpayers and all citizens are better off. That’s what we’re trying to do.”

Parent Support Group

People who suffer through addiction aren’t the only ones suffering. Parents of those going through addiction are sometimes afraid or unsure of what to do if their child is misusing drugs.

The Parent Support Group program was started to help with shared experiences. Any parent of a child who died of overdose, suffers from substance misuse, been in and out of incarceration or just wants to listen can attend. Most of the parents involved are there because at some point they struggled with the idea of balancing holding a child accountable and enabling. While the prosecutor’s office organizes the monthly meetings, sessions are conducted by the parents themselves.

“Most drug addicts start by stealing from a family member. Most don’t want to report it to law enforcement because they don’t want them to get a record,” Blackburn said. “Report it. We have a diversion program. We have drug treatment program. We can get them help.”

Preventure

Preventure is an evidence-based program developed by Dr. Patricia Conrad that is offered to at-risk youth in grades 5-7. It works to identify four personality traits that are at risk for addiction including

sensation seeking, impulsiveness, anxiety and sensitivity, and hopelessness. Athens County is the first in the country to have the program offered by a county prosecutor. Thus far, the program has been implemented by the Blackburn's office at Federal Hocking, Miller and Trimble school districts.

Students are given a questionnaire that screens for and identifies groups of students who exhibit the personality traits. Each group has a 90-minute tailored course offered to help them recognize the decisions to led to at-risk behavior as well as how those actions affect goals.

"Since 2018, Athens County Prosecutor's Office has collaborated with PreVenture to bring evidence-based drug and alcohol prevention and mental health promotion to Athens County schools. In our experience this is one of the most novel and exciting applications of PreVenture," Dr. Conrad said. "By delivering preventative mental health interventions in schools before problems arise, youth can potentially be diverted from becoming involved in the criminal justice system. We have been absolutely thrilled by the Athens County Prosecutor's Office's dedication to investing in preventative mental health services for young people as a way to address the many social and psychological risk factors for substance misuse and combat the drug addiction crisis gripping America."

Blackburn said the prosecutor's office works hard to eliminate the supply of drugs coming into the county and equally hard at eliminating the demand.

"This a targeted, personality-based examination that allows us to identify at-risk students and help them understand their feelings. We work the same concepts with thinking for a change, but this program gives kids the skills they need before ever making it to at-risk situations and decisions with drug misuse," he said.

Blackburn said the Community Justice initiative continually updates its programs with the goal of addressing the underlying factors of crime and addiction.

"This is what the criminal justice system should be about. We should not only stop individuals who commit crime, punish the offenders and protect the public, but we should also try to reduce recidivism and stop new people from getting involved in criminal activity," said Blackburn. "Our programs exemplify what criminal justice reform should be and we've been doing it in Athens County since 2014."

Working Recovery

In September of 2019, six candidates from both the A.C.E. and Vivitrol programs took part in a pilot program titled Working Recovery, a partnership between the Athens County Prosecutor's Office and Tri-County Career Center. Each participant graduated with certificates of completion in workforce basics. The topics of study included career path assistance, job search skills, resume writing, interview techniques, conflict management, effective communication skills and more.

In addition, two other clients completed to learning institution's welding courses and were certified.

"I was excited when Keller Blackburn called and asked if we were willing to partner," said Connie Altier, superintendent of Tri-County Career Center. "This program leads to letting those clients understand that they have options. They were engaged, our teachers enjoyed having them and it was an overall great experience."

While still in the early stages of development, the Working Recovery program has already been deemed a success and efforts are being made to continue the program going forward.

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To schedule an interview with Prosecutor Keller Blackburn, please contact 740-592-3208.