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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Prosecutor's office's Vivitrol program celebrates five years of saving lives**

**Vivitrol has helped hundreds overcome drug misuse**

**ATHENS, Ohio** – In 2015, Athens County Prosecutor Keller Blackburn launched the Vivitrol program as part of the office's Community Justice initiatives. Five years later, the program has saved lives, bettered the community and helped hundreds find a viable path through drug misuse to recovery.

"What I want is for anytime someone is involved in the criminal justice system that it is the last time they are a defendant," Blackburn said. "We need to deal with the underlying causes of why someone is involved in crime and, most notably, drugs are a leading cause of crime. If we can treat the addiction, we can get people out of the justice system."

Since the program's inception, the five-year rate of drug overdose death per 100,000 population in Athens County has dropped to 81<sup>st</sup> of 88 counties in Ohio compared to the county's standing at 20<sup>th</sup> in 2013.

Vivitrol (naltrexone) is a monthly medication taken by injection that helps prevent opioid dependency. Vivitrol blocks dopamine from getting to receptors in the brain and is non-addictive. It changes the chemical imbalance of the brain and blocks the desire to misuse heroin and other opiates. Blackburn's program combines Vivitrol with comprehensive behavior therapy to treat both the physical and the mental aspects of addiction and is the first in the nation to be offered by a prosecutor's office.

"One of the hardest things about trying to get sober is wanting help but not knowing where to go. When someone comes to us, we listen to their needs, we know all the treatment providers and we put you in the best situation for you personally to succeed," Blackburn said.

Reuben Kittle, an investigator and director of diversion, and Becky Filar, director of Community Justice, have helped run the program since its inception.

“What we see is people immediately respond with ‘I felt a huge sense of relief. I no longer wanted to use.’ We don’t run into people who are still trying to use drugs while on Vivitrol. If there’s a relapse, it’s only because they stopped taking the Vivitrol,” said Filar.

“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. You don’t have that mental thought of chasing that high so you don’t get sick,” Kittle added.

Blackburn said the Vivitrol program works by listening to the client, determining the right treatment provider and providing encouragement to deal with the underlying issues of addiction. The program can also be applied to those not involved with the criminal justice system but still seeking a way out from under addiction.

Area residents 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.

She wanted to get clean. She wanted that for herself and she wanted to do it for her sons but she didn’t know how to accomplish that goal. When she learned about Vivitrol, Losey pleaded to get into the program.

“That first shot killed everything. It killed the cravings and everything. It took away the craving, the sickness, all that stuff that comes with coming down off of drugs. It took all that away,” Losey said. “It was easier to cope with and get my head clear rather than worry about waking up with sickness or going to meetings but only being able to think about getting more dope. With Vivitrol, that doesn’t even cross your mind. It’s amazing.”

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.

"My worst day in recovery is still better than my best day getting high," Darst said.

Through the encouragement of the prosecutor's office, Darst 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."

"I love seeing our graduates go into fields where they are helping others deal with addiction. They've been through this and they can say they've been there. They know it may seem like they'll never get to the other side but they're proof you're able to," Filar added.

Vivitrol takes a commitment to being sober as the body needs to be without drugs for 10 days before an injection. Once administered, Vivitrol lasts for 28 days. The program itself goes for at least a year and is tailored to each client.

Kittle explained that a person joining the program signs a contract, sets up counseling and treatment appointments and undergoes assessments. He said the program is detailed step-by-step and includes individual counseling, weekly group meetings and visits with the prosecutor's office, medical personnel and counselors.

The feedback from those in the program has been overwhelmingly positive. Filar said the office has been able to overcome potential issues of mistrust by proving that the officials are there to help clients achieve their goals of overcoming addiction. She said the program's reputation speaks for itself.

Some responses from participants of the program include:

- *Everyone has been supportive.*
- *It's great. Everyone should take advantage of this.*
- *Saved my life.*
- *Will continue counseling even after done with the program.*
- *It's awesome once you change your mindset.*
- *They really care about you.*
- *Really helped get my life together.*

The Vivitrol program accepts 45-50 new clients each year on average. Although some clients may take longer to complete the program than others, Kittle said the prosecutor's office is "not good on giving up on people."

“It’s gratifying to see the program work because we believe in it and these lives have actually been changed for the better,” Kittle said.

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](#).



*Reuben Kittle, director of diversion, hugs a Vivitrol program graduate during a completion ceremony while Becky Filar, director of Community Justice, and Athens County Prosecutor Keller Blackburn prepare to deliver her certificate.*