

Butler Eagle

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Gaiser Center expands efforts for treatment

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BUTLER TWP — At the Ellen O'Brien Gaiser Center's annual Community Celebration luncheon on Tuesday, administrators called on county residents to rally around the goals of understanding and treatment to combat drug addiction and overdose deaths. At an event replete with treatment experts and administrators, the keynote moment came from a young woman who said her name was Shelby — a recovering alcoholic and drug user who said the center helped her piece her life back together after she bottomed out several years ago.

Shelby said she began drinking at a young age, and spent years in the grip of alcohol and drug addiction before winding up in Allegheny County Jail in 2013. There, she was hooked up with the Gaiser Center through an in-jail program. The woman, who called herself a “fear-driven alcoholic,” said she eventually moved to Butler into a three-quarters house, a sober living facility similar to a halfway house, but residents are granted more freedoms. She lived there for about a year before moving back to Pittsburgh and restarting her life.

Shelby said that today she has a 7-month-old daughter and a fiancé; owns a home and her own car; and credits the center and the Alcoholics Anonymous program with helping to turn her life around.

“Drugs and alcohol had taken everything from me. I didn't see anything except for the next drug or the next drink,” she said. “I went to the Gaiser Center and I got hope. I don't fear today.”

Administrators at the Gaiser Center noted that Shelby's story isn't at all that uncommon. “What we know is that addicts who come to Gaiser are typically good people,” said Jerry Miller, the president of Gaiser's board of directors. “They just do bad things because of their addiction.”

Miller and others spoke about addiction and recovery at the center's luncheon at Butler Country Club. They called the county's current struggles with opioid and heroin

addiction and overdose deaths an “unprecedented epidemic” that has spiraled out of control in recent years.

Linda Franiewski, the center's executive director, said that the county has seen a dramatic increase in overdose deaths since 2013, when 13 people died. Through the first nine months of 2016, Franiewski said, the county has confirmed 50 overdose deaths — already five more than all of 2015. She called for people to put aside their differences and unite to demand more comprehensive treatment services for addicts and a better understanding of addiction as a treatable disease.

“What's going on in our community is pretty unacceptable,” Franiewski said. “Many of them (addicts) are our neighbors. And if we don't fight, the fight isn't happening a lot of times.”

Franiewski said the Gaiser Center was working with Butler YMCA and would begin offering a support group for families sometime next year. The Center will provide professional staffing for the group, Franiewski said, and the YMCA will allow the group to use its facilities to host meetings.

Franiewski called the addition a step forward for families struggling with addiction or overdose deaths. Families are often “ashamed,” and feel “as if it's their fault,” she said. Currently there is one support group — Hope for Broken Hearts — for the families of overdose victims operating in Butler. Franiewski called them “a mainstay” of support within the community, but added that it was vital to broaden the network of support for people whose lives have been affected by addiction.

“The families are absolutely devastated,” she said. “They have nowhere to turn.” Franiewski's call for more community involvement and expanded treatment services was underpinned Tuesday by the Center's announcement that it expected to begin mobilizing for an expansion of its inpatient treatment center on Old Plank Road as early as next week. Franiewski said the new facility is expected to be open sometime next spring.

The expansion, which was initially announced in April, comes after what the center has called a “substantial” increase in demand among women for addiction treatment services. Miller said the organization first recognized the need about two years ago, and has responded by planning a 4,590-square-foot, two-story addition to its inpatient clinic that could hold up to 16 female clients. Franiewski said many of the women seeking addiction treatment services at Gaiser are mothers with young children — a population of addicts that has grown alongside that of middle-aged users, according to Ken

Montrose, the director of publications and training at Greenbriar Treatment Center, a Wexford-based mental health and substance abuse training center.

Montrose, who called himself a longtime recovering alcoholic, said families and communities struggling to stem the tide of drug addiction and overdose deaths have to make sometimes-painful decisions before they can hope to succeed. Sometimes, he said, it's better to leave a struggling addict in jail rather than bail them out; or cut ties with a manipulative family member.

At the same time, Montrose said, people should realize that tough love only goes so far. Brushing off an addict as a lost cause — or even someone not worth saving — is a state-of-mind that perpetuates the stigma and shame associated with addiction and overdose deaths.

"There's no such thing as a hopeless addict. People make miraculous recoveries," Montrose said. "Consider the idea that it could be your family. You probably know an addict. You just don't know it."