Overdose Worse than AIDS Epidemic

The federal government reports that 64,000 people died of drug overdoses in 2016, reflecting an alarming 22% increase over 2015. Overdose is now the leading cause of death for Americans under 50 and is expected to remain the country’s number one threat. Accidental overdose is killing more people faster than AIDS did at the height of the epidemic. The American Society of Addiction Medicine reports that 20.5 million Americans 12 and older now have a substance use disorder. How did we get to this point? For many, the road to opioid addiction started with an injury.

One woman’s story
Amy was always serious about success. She worked hard from the time she was 14 and by 30, with two degrees under her belt, she was a manager at a Syracuse hospital and owned her own cleaning business on the side. Her life continued on the careful course she had plotted, until one morning when she tried to get out of bed and found that she couldn’t move.

“I woke up and felt paralyzed. I couldn’t even walk. I had emergency back surgery, and that is when it all started.” ‘It’ was her addiction to painkillers. The woman who ‘never even took an aspirin’ over time became addicted to opioid painkillers.

Amy had been on a morphine drip in the hospital and was discharged with a prescription for Percocet, a pill containing oxycodone and acetaminophen. The pills eased her pain and allowed her to return to work full time, but every couple of hours she needed another Percocet to keep the pain in check. It was like a roller coaster ride with alternating waves of pain and relief, but her physical distress was under control enough to let her work every day.

When the Percocets were no longer effective, her doctor increased the strength of the dose and the number prescribed. “Eight years I was given prescriptions month after month. I was getting 360 maximum strength pain pills a month. Then suddenly the doctor discharged me saying that he felt we no longer had a personal connection.”

In desperate shape, Amy searched without success for a new doctor who would prescribe enough medication to block her discomfort. Not one would accept her as a patient and, without access to Percocets, she went into severe withdrawal. “Withdrawal is so physical. The sickness is unexplainable. You will do anything to try to feel normal again.”

Amy turned to the streets for relief. Pills that had been easily affordable with her insurance now cost up to $10 each. In time she went through all of her savings – even took on new debt in order to satisfy her cravings. “Then one day someone said, ‘Wow, you’re spending all that money. Why? For ten dollars you can get heroin that does the same thing.’ And there came that devil.”

Amy’s back surgery led to years of opioid dependence.
**END AIDS?**

**Start with Clean Needles**

The most successful program ever implemented by the New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute to combat AIDS was Syringe Exchange. In a 2014 report, AIDS Institute described syringe exchange as the one intervention that could be described as the gold standard of HIV prevention.*

Among the most direct ways to spread HIV is by sharing HIV-contaminated needles,** In 1988 the state identified needle-sharing as the predominant risk behavior for new AIDS cases in New York. By 1992, New York had become the epicenter of two connected epidemics: substance use and HIV. New York had the highest number of HIV and AIDS cases in the United States and more than half - 52% - of all new HIV infections were in people who shared needles.

Our state addressed the AIDS crisis head on. It set up a series of syringe exchange programs (SEP) across the state to supply clean needles to injection drug users free of charge and train them to use a clean needle every time they inject.

Now, a quarter of a century later and with establishment of 24 syringe exchanges around New York, direct evidence shows that less than 3% of new HIV infections are found in injection drug users.

Many syringe exchange programs operate multiple sites. ACR Health opened its first SEP in 2011 and presently has three locations: two in Syracuse and one in Utica. We will open a fourth site in Watertown in October.

We were very late to offer this public health initiative. New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute tried to establish an exchange in Syracuse in 1996 but controversy erupted and the state backed away. Concerned individuals claimed that making syringes available promotes substance abuse. This is false.

Beth Israel Medical Center is among the latest organizations to test the theory and found that syringe exchange does not attract people to drug use. In fact, among SEP participants, injection frequency declined 8%.

The 2014 report also concluded that needle exchanges save money in the long term. The lifetime cost of someone in the United States with an early diagnosis of HIV is about $427,000. The cost of operating SEPs is far less.

Heroin use is now an epidemic in New York just as AIDS was in 1983 when ACR Health came into existence. We will confront this public health threat with experience, competence, and compassion for those affected, providing proven programs and services to meet human needs. We cannot complete our mission without strong support from the communities we serve. We deeply appreciate the confidence you have placed in ACR Health.

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** The other prominent pathway is having unprotected sex.
Amy’s experience is just one of hundreds we encounter at ACR Health’s Syringe Exchange and Medical Clinic for injection drug users. Every story is unique, but many begin the same place as Amy’s – with an injury and a legitimate prescription for a pain reliever.

The New York State Legislature’s 2012 attempt to curb over-prescription of pain medications cut off the endless supply but had the unintended consequence of creating victims like Amy. Abruptly separated from her lifeline she turned to the streets to buy first pills, then heroin, and finally Fentanyl – a synthetic opiate up to a hundred times more powerful than heroin.

“Many substance users do not know the composition of the drugs they are injecting, said Alexandra Punch, Director of Drug Users Health. “By visiting ACR Health’s Syringe Exchange of Medical Clinic, we can help education clients with safe steps to decrease their chance of overdose.”

By injecting such powerful and unregulated drugs, Amy could easily have been one of the 64,000 Americans who died of accidental overdoses last year. Instead, her life’s journey wound its way to ACR Health, and Syringe Exchange Coordinator Belinda Felder. Amy was already on methadone by then and only came because a man in her program told her that nobody here would judge her.

“She wore a hoodie pulled down over her face and stretched out sweat pants. She had thirty-two abscesses on her body from a blood infection. She refused to go to a hospital,” said Belinda, who is skilled at working with injection drug users and helping them make small but significant steps toward better health. “For me, as a harm reductionist, it’s not what you do, but how you do it. If you are shooting heroin, make sure you use a clean needle every time. If you have abscesses and won’t go to the hospital, let me talk to the doctor and see what you need to make yourself better.”

Amy was deeply ashamed of her drug use and in a very dark place. By the time she met Belinda she had already decided to kill herself. “Until she can find herself in a good place, I need to keep her healthy.”

Three months in, Amy has hope again. She styles her hair and wears makeup. Belinda says she is like a flower that has bloomed. “Your place is wonderful,” Amy said. “If I didn’t have support from Belinda and your agency I would have been in the grave.”

If you or someone you know uses heroin, prescription painkillers, or any other opiate ACR Health has a number of essential services to help you stay healthy. We supply clean needles through our syringe exchange; have a medical clinic for substance users; teach you how to administer naloxone, the overdose reversal medication; provide confidential testing for HIV, Hepatitis C, and sexually transmitted infections; and can help you get into treatment.

“For me, as a harm reductionist, it’s not what you do, but how you do it. If you are shooting heroin, make sure you use a clean needle every time.”
We Get by with a Little Help from Our Friends

ACR Health has recently had excellent news of the financial variety from five separate sources.

- Central New York Community Foundation has granted ACR Health Youth Services $47,478 to provide mental health services for Q Center youth throughout our nine-county service area. This important resource has been an unmet, yet critical need.

- The Gifford Foundation has granted $13,500 to redesign and upgrade ACR Health’s website. These capabilities will strengthen our connection within the communities we serve, online donor giving, and interface with staff, clients and board members.

- The Fred L. Emerson Foundation has donated $10,000 for the expansion of ACR Health’s food pantry. These funds will allow us to increase our outreach to those in rural areas who have challenges with proper nutrition and food sources.

- From Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS of New York City comes a generous contribution of $7,500. Five thousand dollars will be used to supply for food baskets for the Holiday Angel Program for ACR Health clients and their families. The Q Center will receive $2,500 for foundational support.

- M&T Bank has granted $5,000 to support ACR Health Youth Services programming throughout nine counties. A longtime supporter, M&T Bank has made similar donations annually since 2006.

ACR Health Director of Major Gifts, Frances B. Hradil is the one who reaches out to community donors. “People understand that what we do makes fundamental differences in people’s lives. It’s quite moving to have the support of many organizations and individual donors who wish to share their resources with ACR Health and those we serve.”

The Great Scavenger HUNT at the New York State Fair

It was the Ultimate New York State Fair experience! Hundreds of fairgoers signed on to play the Great Scavenger Hunt and get a crack at winning the $1,000 grand prize. They faced fun challenges like the Dancing Gianelli Pig Challenge - or posing like a banana, singing karaoke, or doing an impersonation of a news anchor describing the butter sculpture. It was 100% State Fair entertainment.

The winner – the person with the most points at the end of the State Fair – is Rylee Piedmonte of Syracuse who proved to be an awesome contestant. “I really loved the game!” she said as she collected her winnings, a check for $1,000.

“We really had a great time with this contest, a perfect collaboration between us and the New York State Fair,” said ACR Health’s Director of Events and Business Development Anthony McEachern. “There was a lot of lively competition. Contestants said that playing the game made the State Fair even better.”
A Decade of Dedicated Fundraising

She knows firsthand that it takes resources to treat and prevent HIV/AIDS, so every year North Country physician Dr. Marylene Duah is unstoppable in transforming her First Frost Walk/Run team into a fundraising powerhouse. The **Samaritan HI fivE** Team has registered in the top tier for fundraising at the First Frost since 2007. Dr. Duah is the only infectious disease doctor in Northern New York and her advocacy and passion for her patients is limitless.

“Dr. Duah is essential to this agency and community. She is able to rally her already hardworking team and family and work hard to raise money for this event every year,” said ACR Health Regional Director for Northern New York, Cari Knight. “Her patients know and trust that she is doing everything she can to help them live a healthier fuller life. We could not be more honored and proud that she supports us.”

The 18th Annual “First Frost” Walk/Run will be Sunday, October 15, 2017 at the Thompson Park Zoo and Conservancy in Watertown. The 5K event, benefiting ACR Health, starts at 1:00 p.m., rain or shine. Registration begins at 11:30 a.m.

The “First Frost” 5K walk and timed 5K run is ACR Health’s largest outreach and fundraising event in the North Country. 100% of the money raised in the “First Frost” Walk/Run goes to support ACR Health’s Q Center, youth HIV/STD prevention programs, and client support services in Jefferson, Lewis, Oswego, and St. Lawrence counties.

If you are interested in walking, running, or forming a team, you can register online at www.ACRHealth.org/AWR or call 800.475.2430.

Team Up to Clean Up

On a hot Friday in August teams from the Syracuse University College of Law and ACR Health hit the streets of Syracuse for a Citywide Clean Up.

More than 200 volunteers from the incoming class of law students (in blue shirts) and ACR Health staff (in red shirts) put their hands to work picking up debris left behind by Central New York’s heroin problem. Together students and ACR Health staff picked up more than **4,000 pounds** of trash, including contaminated needles that were safely disposed of by trained ACR staff.

“The community service project is a way to introduce incoming students to the importance of giving back to one’s community. The project supports the concept of law as a societal good, a cornerstone of the profession they will be joining,” said Kelly K. Curtis, Associate Dean of Students and Teaching Professor.

Students learned about vital ACR Health programs like Syringe Exchange (SEP) and the Medical Clinic to assist injection drug users to keep them healthy, free of HIV and Hepatitis C, all while educating SEP clients about limiting their risks and helping to place them in treatment facilities when they are ready to take that step. ACR Health reduces harm by ensuring that people who use drugs and their loved ones have access to information and support.

“Without judgment or stigma, ACR Health provides tools and support to create safe and healthy communities for all, and cleaning up our neighborhoods is just one way we can impact lives,” said Wil Murtaugh, ACR Health Executive Director.

Special thanks to attorneys who led small group sessions with ACR Health staff about practicing law with a philanthropic lens, be it nonprofit board service, pro bono work, or political action: Shannon O’Connor, ACR Health Board President, Patrick Blood, Sally Curran, Collen Gibbons, Mimi Satter, Tom Taylor, and Julia Martin.

Each incoming College of Law class participates in a community service project that connects the students with the surrounding area while demonstrating the benefits of giving back. We hope to be invited back!
End AIDS by 2020: Good Progress Noted

Since January 2015 New York has invested millions in the Campaign to End the AIDS Epidemic by 2020. Now for the first time there is proof that the effort is paying off.

There is significant progress to report in New York’s campaign to End the AIDS Epidemic by 2020. For the first time in a decade, the number of new HIV infections diagnosed in men who have sex with men (MSM) decreased dramatically in New York State, down 10% in the number of new HIV infections in MSM from 2014 to 2015.

• In 2014, nearly two-thousand men, 1,975, were newly diagnosed with HIV in New York.
• In 2015, the number of HIV cases decreased by 200 to 1,775.

New York’s statistics are exceptional because gay and bisexual men have the highest HIV infection rate of any group in the country, increasing by 6% at a time while overall HIV rate is going down nationally.

Executive Director Wil Murtaugh held a series of press conferences throughout ACR Health territory to share news of the progress, and to remind people to get tested for HIV.

Dining Out for Life
Eat, Drink, and Give Back

Hungry? Dine Out and Fight AIDS. ACR Health is holding a fun and filling fundraiser, “Dining Out For Life,” at restaurants throughout the Mohawk Valley on Wednesday, October 11, 2017. Local restaurants donate a portion of their proceeds on this one special day, October 11, to ACR Health, fighting AIDS for 34 years! Each dinner guest will be greeted by an Ambassador who can answer questions about ACR Health services in the Mohawk Valley. The Ambassador at Symeons will be Lara Nash of the Greater Utica Chamber of Commerce.

“As a proud participant in ACR Health’s AIDS Hike for Life I am excited for the chance to contribute as an Ambassador in the area’s first Dining Out for Life event!” said Lara, who urges all who share her vision for creating optimal health opportunity to, “Bring your friends and family and join me at Symeons’ Greek Restaurant. Make your reservations now!”

“I am honored and humbled that these amazing restaurants are embracing the Dining Out for Life event,” said Assistant Director of Development, Maureen Harrington O’Neill. “One of the reasons why I love this fundraiser is that it specifically funds agencies that serve people living with HIV/AIDS and simultaneously supports local business. I call that teamwork.”

Genaro Raymond is the Event Chair and Julie Schofield the Co-chair...their work has been invaluable to this project!
Open Enrollment Dates:
November 1, 2017 - January 31, 2018

When it comes to health insurance, New York is the place to be. The state’s official health plan Marketplace, has announced that the Open Enrollment Period for 2018 Qualified Health Plan coverage will begin November 1, 2017 and end January 31, 2018.

While the federal government cut the 2018 Open Enrollment Period in half, New York is building on its success and is exercising its authority to extend the deadline. A longer enrollment period has been shown to increase enrollment of younger individuals and enables ACR Health Navigators to provide better customer service to New Yorkers.

In the states that use the federal marketplace, HealthCare.gov, the federal government has set December 15, 2017, as the end date for open enrollment. Because New York operates its own marketplace, it is exercising this authority to meet the needs of consumers by ensuring that they have sufficient time to enroll, and adequate access to enrollment assistance from the Customer Service Center and in-person assistors. Given the volume of calls and appointments during previous open enrollment periods, a shortened Open Enrollment could result in longer consumer wait times.

“When the feds cut back funding for navigator services, social media erupted. People were concerned about their ability to enroll,” said Steve Wood, Director of Insurance Programs. “We have different rules in New York and our open enrollment is from November first through the end of January.”

The state’s goal is to ensure that consumers have adequate time to shop for and enroll in the health plan that is best for their family. Since 2013, more than 3.6 million New Yorkers have enrolled in affordable coverage through the Marketplace.

NY State of Health expects to renew coverage for more than 400,000 households and enroll new people into coverage during the Open Enrollment Period. Data show that younger individuals are more likely to enroll later in the Open Enrollment Period.

Individuals currently enrolled in a plan through NY State of Health will receive notices in October about how to renew their coverage for 2018 directly from the Marketplace. Notices will include information about how to select a plan, if applicable. Details about 2018 plan options will be released in late September.

For people with Medicaid, Wood said open enrollment is contingent on their anniversary date. “Many Medicaid clients are getting early recertification notices. This is something new. Sometimes the early recertification is months ahead of where it should be. We are happy to take those clients and recertify them early - just call us to set up an appointment.”

Enrollment in the Essential Plan, Medicaid and Child Health Plus is open all year.

For more information, or to set up an appointment with a navigator, call 800.475.2430 or email navigator@ACRHealth.org.

“When the feds cut back funding for navigator services, social media erupted. People were concerned about their ability to enroll.”

Steve Wood, Director of Insurance Programs.
ACR Health offers its services to anyone without discrimination based on age, race, creed, color, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, political affiliation, marital status, handicapped status, or mode of transmission.

ACR Health is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Follow us on:

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**UPCOMING EVENTS**

**October 11, 2017 – Wednesday**
Dining Out for Life
Eat, drink, and give back. Participating Mohawk Valley restaurants will donate a portion of your bill to ACR Health to help in the fight against AIDS. Chews Change and Join Us!

**October 15, 2017 - Sunday**
18th Annual First Frost Walk/Run
1:00 p.m. Thompson Park Zoo and Conservatory, Watertown. Sign up as an individual or a team.
Want to train with a group? Sign up for the Couch to 5K in 5 weeks. To register call Page Fitness 315.786.8032.

**November 14, 2017 – Tuesday**
Open House
4:30-6:30 p.m. at ACR Health headquarters, 627 West Genesee Street, Syracuse. Come for refreshments and a tour of the Q Center, Syringe Exchange, and Medical Clinic.

**Now-December 2017**
Holiday Angels
Join us as we brighten the holiday season for those affected by chronic diseases (including HIV/AIDS) by providing needed items as gifts for ACR Health clients. Call 800.475.2430 for more information.

**December 1, 2017 - Friday**
World AIDS Day
Remembrance service at 7:30 a.m. at LeMoyne College’s Panasci Chapel. Music provided by the Syracuse Gay & Lesbian Chorus. Reception to follow at 8:00 a.m. Call 315.475.2430 to find a World AIDS Day event near you.

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**Q CENTERS FOR LGBTQ YOUTH**

Resources throughout Central, Northern, and Mohawk Valley regions. For information call 800.475.2430 or email QCenter@ACRHealth.org
Group times listed ACRHealth.org/youth

**TESTING SERVICES**

HIV, gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, and Hepatitis C. Testing@ACRHealth.org

**NARCAN TRAINING**

Monthly trainings at ACR Health offices. Appointments: Narcan@ACRHealth.org

**SYRINGE EXCHANGES**

• Syracuse Office, 637 W. Genesee Street, and Outreach Van at corner of Dudley & Fitch Street
• Utica Office: 287 Genesee Street
SEP@ACRHealth.org

**DRUG USER HEALTH CLINIC – SYRACUSE**

Provides onsite access to acute medical care, medication assisted therapy, and linkage to additional medical resources.

**HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAMS**

Health insurance enrollment and advocacy. Navigator@ACRHealth.org

**GET INVOLVED. JOIN THE TEAM.**

Looking for meaningful work? ACRHealth.org/careers
Interested in volunteering or interning with ACR Health? Volunteer@ACRHealth.org

For information on all programs, call 1.800.475.2430
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