The Opioid Epidemic: Advocacy for The Underserved

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Past: Origins Of The Epidemic

Then: For decades we have responded to addiction with incarceration instead of treatment

- 1970: Nixon Declares a “War on Drugs”
- Mandatory sentencing: Ex) Rockefeller Drug Laws create minimum mandatory sentences of 15 years to life for possession of 4 ounces of narcotics
- 1980s: Zero tolerance policies developed and number of nonviolent offenders in prison skyrocketed
  • “Just Say No” anti-drug campaign
  • Prison population has increased by 400% since 1980
  • >50% of federal inmates are incarcerated for drug offenses

Opioid prescription practices were influenced by the public perception of inadequate pain management and release of JCAHO pain scale in EDs across the US

Now: The emphasis on addiction is concerned with prevention and recovery over incarceration

- 2009: Rockefeller Drug Laws are reformed
- Elimination of mandatory minimum sentences
- Expansion of drug treatment programs
- Alternatives to incarceration
- resentencing of incarcerated individuals serving sentences under the old laws

Future: Proposed Programs To Help Deal With The Issue

Needle Exchange: Free exchange of dirty needles for clean ones. A way to get IV drug users through the door and thinking about recovery

- Reduces rates of risk behavior by up to 60%
- Decreases HIV transmission by 33-42%
- For every $100 spent on needle exchange programs, $758 is saved in HIV associated costs

Drug Courts: Linkage to long term treatment under judicial supervision

- Team based approach with management by judge, attorney, social workers, and treatment professionals
- Proven to reduce recidivism in several meta analyses by an average of 10-15% in addition to reducing crime rates overall
- Every dollar invested returns $2.21 in savings over costs associated with the criminal justice system. Results in $3,000-$13,000 saved per patient
- More effective when targeted at “high-risk” offenders

Recovery Coaches: Peer leaders with more recovery experience than the person being served

- Coaches serve a supportive rather than directive role
- Help clients with fundamental, yet essential life skills necessary for successful recovery, such as:
  - Applying for jobs, grocery shopping, meeting new (sober) friends, accessing mental health services, navigating the criminal justice system
- Studies have found that young opiate users stay sober an average of 240 days longer after completing treatment when the individuals had recovery coaches

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