

To the editor, The Hour

I have never liked the term “War on Drugs” because a drug is an inanimate object; I prefer to look at it more as a war on drug trafficking. People who live with addiction are not the enemy and we should not be waging a war with people who need our help. There are two sides to this problem, the supply of drugs and where they come from is one. The other is addiction and the stigma associated with the lifestyle and behavior of an addict. I want to address the addiction side of this issue.

First, we should never wage a war against someone who truly needs our help. We should be standing beside them and help them get a stronger foothold in the battle they are fighting against addiction. I believe the only way to win this fight is by helping one person at a time rather than addressing this as a systemic problem in our society. Not everyone uses drugs for the same reason and no two people are exactly alike. A one-size-fits-all solution will not solve this problem; if it were going to work it would have already yielded much better results.

I have never had a problem with any type of chemical addiction, I’ve been lucky. Since becoming more involved in the mental health awareness movement, I have met a large number of good people who have had treatment in the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services system. They have struggled to take their lives back and free themselves from the hold drugs had on them. Eventually I was able to take the Recovery Support Specialist (RSS) training and become certified to help people living with mental illness, addiction or a co-occurrence between the two.

Trained peers in the workforce are an often overlooked option by the state agencies trying to deal with the problems created by drug use, one of the biggest is the opioid epidemic. In Connecticut there have been trainings on how to administer Narcan, they have been free of charge and open to the public. This is a huge step in the prevention of deaths as a result of overdose, but does little to address the issue of addiction. Last month in New Haven, dozens of people were transported to area hospitals after overdosing on a tainted batch of K2 or “Spice,” which is a synthetic marijuana. A city official said 114 calls for people needing medical attention came in, at least 10 people overdosed more than once.

My RSS certificate number is 00979 and I was not a part of the last class to graduate. This leads me to believe that there are more than 1,000 certified peers within my state who are trained to help. The rapid response of EMS and police certainly saved lives, but no one addressed the fact that even though the emergency had passed the crisis was still happening for some of these people. At one point, volunteers walked around New Haven just keeping an eye out for anyone showing signs of a drug overdose. When it came to saving lives and the response of the system, it worked as it should have. I do, however, have to ask the question about the level of follow-up support considering how many people overdosed more than once.

If they want to call this a “war,” then let’s look at it from that point of view. You can’t fight a war without soldiers, boots on the ground. They need to be trained, they need to know the enemy and they need to know how to beat that enemy. Peers working in the field have been proven to be a valuable asset and they have the skill set needed to make a difference. I, for one, would volunteer and step forward to help someone start their path of recovery and I know I am not the only RSS who would.

In military terms, the number of graduates from the Advocacy Unlimited RSS trainings are roughly the same number of soldiers in a battalion. If someone from the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services ever reads this, I want you to know one thing — You are not going to win a war without troops. We are here, we are willing and we are ready.

Thank you for your time,

Jeffrey Santo