

Why police are putting people in treatment instead of jail

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Editor's Note: This op-ed/editorial was written by John Guilfoil, Director of the Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative ([P.A.A.R.I.](#)). This piece is part of our [Special Series on Addiction Treatment within Correctional Facilities](#). We're grateful to Mr. Guilfoil for sharing his perspectives.

It is not news that the substance abuse crisis in our nation has reached epidemic proportions, and it is probably not news that drug addicts are often arrested for possession, which is their most likely interaction with police officers.

But it has become national news suddenly that police departments are fed up with simply arresting drug addicts. Today, police departments across the nation are recognizing that there is a different way to approach this crisis.

Police are directly putting people into treatment, and police are going so far as to promise addicts that they will not be arrested, prosecuted, and jailed if they trust the police and the process.

What began in Gloucester, Mass. with a [bold social media statement](#) by Police Chief Leonard Campanello has now spread to nine other states and nearly 40 other police departments. It has also spawned a national non-profit, the [Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative \(P.A.A.R.I.\)](#), to support these efforts. This represents a growing preponderance of police chiefs, sheriffs, and government leaders who view addiction as a disease - not a crime — and view addicts as people suffering from a health problem - not criminals.

Yet, in many places around the nation, jail is still seen as a solution to the drug problem. In Maine, for example, three police departments have signed on with P.A.A.R.I. to launch addiction outreach and recovery programs, but the well-intentioned officers and chiefs face their biggest obstacle in their own state government and a governor [who believes in a 1970s approach to drug addiction](#), enforcing strict laws and imprisoning addicts over putting people in treatment.

This week, President Barack Obama spoke the same words that Chief Campanello and our police partners have been saying all along: “We can’t arrest our way out

of this problem.”

There are treatment models that work, and real people are able to retake their lives and free themselves from the cycle of opioid addiction, which left untreated, is too often a death sentence.

Putting those in the grip of addiction in jail - telling them that they are bad people and have done bad things - is not the solution. Yes, we know that addicts commit a variety of crimes to support their addictions, but they commit these crimes BECAUSE they are addicts, not because they are hard-wired criminals. Nobody steals from their grandmother because they are in the right frame of mind.

In June, Chief Campanello created his groundbreaking ANGEL Initiative to offer treatment to drug addicts who come to the police station and ask for help instead of arresting them. Today, 250 people have taken him up on his offer. While the numbers are preliminary and much research remains, overdose deaths have plummeted in Gloucester and property crime is down nearly one fourth since the program started.

Prior to the ANGEL Initiative, cops and addicts have always had a very clear relationship - the good guy and the bad guy. The Gloucester Police and every police department that has partnered with P.A.A.R.I. have not only blurred that line, they have begun to erase it.

We still have a very long road ahead of us. More people die right now from overdoses than car accidents. That is a staggering statistic. Police officers on the ground have found that this disease does not discriminate. This is not a problem that lives under a bridge amount a marginalized segment of society. Heroin addicts are middle class, upper class, white, black, Hispanic, educated, uneducated, men, woman, boys, and girls. What police have found is that, in most cases, they use heroin after years of abusing prescription opioid pills, [which were originally prescribed to them for a legitimate purpose like a sports injury](#) or surgery. They don't start by stealing from their parents' medicine cabinet; that is step two or step three in the addiction process.

When a person suffering from addiction comes into the police station, they are treated with respect and dignity. They are offered coffee, water, and food. No one asks them who their dealer is. There are no bright lights. It is a comfortable environment. In Gloucester's case, Chief Campanello shakes the person's hand

and welcomes them to “the last recovery of their life” and makes the promise that if they relapse - and some have - they can come back and get helped again -and they have.

P.A.A.R.I. police partners have teamed with more than 50 treatment centers in all corners of the country. We have found beds. We refuse to take “no” for an answer. We have placed every, single person who has come to us seeking help into treatment. No one has been sent home to use again and possibly die. The same cannot be said for any other entity, including and perhaps especially, hospital emergency rooms.

What we have found is that not only are there beds, there are plenty of them. Our biggest obstacle, when we have a friendly local or state government, is the healthcare system itself, and we have found an utterly broken system that is either not equipped to handle the opioid crisis or is unwilling to see the humanity of the problem and make the necessary institutional changes that are needed.

By opening their doors to those battling addiction, these police departments are seeking to forever change the way that law enforcement and other entities view substance abuse and addiction. Beyond that, they are tossing a provocative gauntlet at the feet of local, state, and federal government, the pharmaceutical industry, health insurers, and healthcare facilities, saying: “If a conservative, traditional entity like the police are willing to endure fundamental change - if we are willing to take this on - you better follow.”

John Guilfoil is the Principal Owner of John Guilfoil Public Relations LLC of Georgetown and is Director of the Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative.

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