

# Hope for those battling addiction

Somerset Treatment Services offers group sessions, support and relapse aid

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In 2011, nursing an addiction to OxyContin and ultimately heroin, a 25-year-old Hunterdon County resident found himself in the full-blown grips of substance abuse.

Unable to remain in graduate school

and facing mounting legal troubles, "I'd been to rehab and probation two to three times and my life was upside down — I felt lost," said Chris F., whose full last name is not being shared to protect his privacy. "The detox process treats the immediate physical symptoms of addiction, but the disease is very mental and it becomes a vicious cycle that can feel endless."

Ill and suffering the effects of addic-

tion, "I finally asked for help and surrendered," said the now 32-year-old man of his October 2016 decision to reach out to Somerset Treatment Services in Somerville for support.

## An alarming epidemic

Chris' story is not unlike that of so many others caught in the downward spiral of the opioid epidemic. According

to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 115 Americans die every day from an overdose of opioids, a class of drugs that produce morphine-like effects and include prescription pain relievers, heroin, and synthetically-manufactured fentanyl.

The economic impact of this scourge is just as concerning, according to the Centers for Disease Control, which estimates the cost of opioid misuse in the

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## Addiction

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U.S. — in the form of healthcare expenses, lost productivity, addiction treatment, and criminal justice involvement — to be nearly \$80 billion a year.

It's a reality which Barbara Schlichting, executive director of Somerset

"There were over 63,000 deaths from overdoses nationwide in 2016 and more than 2,000 in New Jersey, largely involving heroin and fentanyl," said Schlichting, who noted that the latter substance, a dangerous additive which can accelerate a user's rate of addiction, has itself become a growing concern. "We've seen a 2,000 percent increase in fentanyl-related deaths between 2013 and 2016," she said. "A lot of people may think they're just using heroin or cocaine, but many of these are cut with fentanyl, which can prove fatal."

Since joining STS 41 years ago, shortly after the treatment and counseling center first opened in 1970 — largely to address the substance abuse issues being experienced by local veterans returning home from the Vietnam War — Schlichting has witnessed many changes to the landscape, good and bad.

Among the more disturbing trends over time, "people died from drug use back in the 1970s, but not to this extent," she said, referring to the increasingly potency of many substances over the years. On a positive note, "STS has expanded its services to be more responsive than ever to the needs of residents of Somerset County and surrounding areas."

While older treatments were largely medication-based, "we now provide more diverse services and have a greater understanding of behavioral and mental health-related 'co-occurring disorders' that accompany addiction," she said. Once providing only out-patient services, "we now offer a range of intensive out-patient (IOP) services for those who are candidates for that approach as well as prevention counseling and psychiatric services."

Following a personalized assessment by a counselor, Schlichting said that STS offers a variety of three-hour IOP group sessions at convenient times throughout the week, group-based support for anger management and relapse prevention, onsite psychiatric services, and safe and proven medication-assisted treatment for opioid-addicted clients, the proper application of which has been shown to reduce addiction-re-



Somerset Treatment Services, located in Somerville, was founded in 1970.  
COURTESY OF SOMERSET TREATMENT SERVICES

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**Mark Brosky**  
Clinical supervisor at STS

lated deaths by 75 percent according to the Legal Action Network.

"Clients can avail themselves of any combination of these services," said Schlichting, noting that STS also offers clients twice-weekly, state-funded opportunities to test for HIV and Hepatitis C.

"Twice a month, we also offer 90-minute training in the use of Narcan, which can counteract the effects of an opioid overdose, and make free Narcan kits and training available to any individual or agency," she said.

Thanks to the state's 2014 Medicaid expansion, more STS clients are eligible for financial support, which has helped remove previous economic obstacles to treatment for those in need. "Between all of the different funding sources available, very few clients have to pay for services here," Schlichting said. "Services were expensive before and many clients had nowhere to turn, but now they do."

## Targeted services

It's all welcome news for the roughly 600 clients treated at STS annually by the organization's 24 staffers, who in-

clude nurses, counselors, and administrators. "Our clients are of all ages and some walk in while others are court-ordered," Schlichting said.

"We work collaboratively with a number of area agencies, including Somerset County Drug Court and Probation, the Division of Children & Families, and the Intoxicated Driver Resource Center and have received tremendous support from the Somerset County Freeholders and the RWJBarnabas Health team," she said. "We measure our outcomes every year and are proud to share that in 2017, substance abuse in the overall area population was down by 71 percent relative to the prior year, criminal activity (including DUIs, drug possession charges, etc.) was down by 96 percent, and over 70 percent of our clients tested negative for drug or alcohol use after six months of treatment here."

Part of their success, said Mark Brosky, clinical supervisor at STS, rests on the organization's tailored programs. "One thing that's changed over the years is that we're seeing women come in at a higher rate today," Brosky said of a once overwhelmingly male clientele that's now 40 percent female.

"I think that the rate of addiction among women was always there, but that women hesitated to get treatment because they were fearful about what might happen to their children. Today, however, we offer targeted programs such as women's-only groups as well as our 'Strengthening Families' curriculum, which teaches basic child-rearing skills and appropriate forms of discipline for parents and aims to help dis-

"We've tried hard to gear our programs to current trends and people's work schedules and offer more targeted services," Brosky added. "We hope the community will see that we're working to respond to their needs."

## Igniting the spark

That approach has been life-changing for Chris F. Initially hesitant to come to STS, "the counselors helped me build my strength and confidence over time," he said, "and I took the treatment seriously, committed to it, and opened up."

Starting by attending two group IOP sessions a week there, Chris now participates in individual sessions with a counselor twice a month and said he feels grateful for the love, support, and opportunities he's been given.

"We all face obstacles, but I now have more skills to deal with them and I feel a sense of accomplishment, growth, and hope," said Chris, who owns a moving company. "All of the team members at STS are super-supportive, truly care about helping clients, and are a great resource for anyone feeling that sense of hopelessness that comes with addiction."

"You don't get into this field unless you're passionate about it, and you only stay because you're dedicated," said Schlichting, who loves the human aspect of her job and the ability to help clients make constructive changes.

"It's exciting to see the transformation that clients make in terms of taking control of their lives, feeling good about themselves, and embracing life," she said. As someone who's been through it, Chris encourages others struggling with addiction to never give up. "Even the smallest ember of hope in your heart is enough to ignite the spark of recovery," he said, "and STS can help get you the rest of the way there."

## For more information:

Somerset Treatment Services is at 118 West End Ave. in Somerville and can be reached at 908-722-1232 or by visiting [somersttreatmentservices.org](http://somersttreatmentservices.org)