

CORONAVIRUS

'We already had an epidemic going on:' Recovering from substance abuse amid coronavirus crisis

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Published 5:00 a.m. ET Apr. 24, 2020 | Updated 3:15 p.m. ET Apr. 25, 2020

Lara became addicted to cocaine after college. It was her drug of choice for years.

But two years ago, the 39-year-old Fair Lawn resident started using heroin and fentanyl.

In and out of recovery since 2008, she entered detox Feb. 18 at Bergen New Bridge Medical Center. She relies on the vivitrol injection, which helps prevent relapse to substance abuse.

Lara also has been in intensive outpatient treatment for three weeks. She's among thousands of New Jerseyans coping with substance abuse in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shattered some support networks and spiked crises in some communities.

"Just as I was starting to get back into going to meetings ... everything shut down," Lara told NorthJersey.com and the USA TODAY NETWORK New Jersey. "I could've used it as an excuse to go back out, but that's not where I'm going. That's not where God wants me to be."

Silent suffering

As the COVID-19 outbreak swept through New Jersey, calls to state addiction helplines and participation in group recovery meetings increased, as did alcohol use and drug overdoses.

ReachNJ, the state's 24-hour addiction hotline, receives an average of 3,500 calls monthly. But by the first week in April, staff started seeing an uptick, said Valerie Mielke, assistant commissioner for the New Jersey Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services. They're on pace to receive 4,000 calls in April.

"The relapse rates are increasing tremendously," said Ellen Elias, senior vice president of prevention and community services at Children's Aid and Family Services, a Bergen County nonprofit. "People are unemployed. They don't have money coming in. It's making it very challenging for a lot of people just to find a way to cope."

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Overdoses in Morris County were 41% higher in the first 15 weeks of 2020 compared to the same time the year before, the Morris County Sheriff's Office said Wednesday. So far in 2020, 27 individuals in Morris County suffered suspected lethal overdoses.

The state saw 789 suspected fatal overdoses between Jan. 1 and March 31 this year — more than 100 more than the same time in 2019.

For comparison, New Jersey reported 2,900 drug overdose deaths in 2018, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Nearly 90% involved opioids. And alcohol-induced deaths in the state totaled nearly 700 in 2018, according to state health assessment data.

Now, feelings of loss, increased stressors and lack of social connection are exacerbating struggles for people who are experiencing or recovering from substance abuse, experts said.

"It's difficult for the people that are trying to get sober or are in early recovery," said recovery advocate Tim Ryan, whose Rehab.com saw inquiries jump 400% during the past month. "My main concern is the people who are suffering in silence."

U.S. alcohol sales were up 55% the week ending March 21, according to the market research firm Nielsen. Online alcohol sales were up nearly 250%.

People who normally had a few drinks in the evening after work are starting to drink as early as 10 a.m. or noon while they're working, Ryan said.

“They're starting to mask their fear, the uncertainty, with more alcohol, more prescription drugs,” Ryan said, adding that he expects “a huge uptick in a number of people who are going to be seeking treatment.”

Gov. Phil Murphy in March declared liquor stores essential. Alcohol withdrawal can require hospitalization, and health authorities need to keep as many people out of emergency rooms as possible to accommodate COVID-19 patients.

In crisis

Morris County's Hope One, a mobile substance abuse and mental health outreach program, had to halt community visits due to the outbreak, said Corporal Erica Valvano, Hope One coordinator. But its Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative, which includes 14 municipal police departments, is still running.

“People can still walk into any of the participating police departments and ask for help,” Valvano said. “They have the proper PPE.”

When individuals voluntarily enter the departments, trained officers screen them and contact Daytop New Jersey, a substance treatment program, which helps individuals access detox, rehab and recovery services.

Hope One also provides no-contact delivery of naloxone, the medical nasal spray known as Narcan used to reverse opioid overdoses.

“We're actually doing Narcan trainings virtually, which is new for us,” Valvano said.

“We're training people how to respond to an overdose.”

Many families, she said, are in denial. They don't reach out for help before their loved one overdoses — and they don't keep a Narcan kit on hand just in case.

Without regular in-person community visits, it's harder to reach people who might need help — and some people now struggle alone, Valvano said, even as Hope One develops new measures and partnerships to aid individuals before crisis strikes.

For the last three years, Bergen County has run a collaborative program that directs authorities to contact an on-call recovery specialist when police or medical workers treat an individual with Narcan. The specialist goes to the emergency room and speaks, with their consent, to the person about entering treatment.

But that's changed since the outbreak took hold, said Elias, of Children's Aid. Overdose victims won't go to the hospital because they're scared of catching coronavirus.

"People are refusing medical attention," she said. "They don't want to put themselves in a position where they're going to be even more vulnerable."

At ReachNJ, two dozen line staff respond to calls around the clock, connecting individuals with strategies ranging from residential treatment facilities and prescription medications to outpatient services and support groups. Anyone can access support regardless of insurance status, Mielke said.

Additional supports are also available for mental health conditions, which often exist simultaneously with substance abuse disorders, she said.

Some calls to the state hotline come from concerned family members who don't know how to support loved ones, Mielke said. Staff can connect them with strategies, too.

"People are gravitating toward not saying anything," said Ryan of Rehab.com. "If you think someone is crossing that line, go search what's available out there."

"I always suggest that people speak their truth through love and grace," he said.

Recovering during the pandemic

Meanwhile, outpatient treatment providers have adjusted to maintain continuity of their services — and avoid leaving recovering individuals in a lurch.

Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous groups are hosting virtual meetings. Some treatment facilities also are providing virtual support groups. Many outpatient services are provided by telephone, and some providers offered patients longer-term supplies of prescription medications to treat their conditions.

But not all treatment options had to go online — and experts and patients alike say in-person meetings are more effective.

Most of Bergen County's intensive outpatient programs suspended group meetings when the outbreak worsened, moving instead to one-on-one phone calls or video chats, said Michael Paoello, chief clinical officer for addictions treatment at New Bridge Medical Center in Paramus.

But the state frowns on virtual group meetings for addiction support because of confidentiality concerns, he said.

So Paoello kept New Bridge's live outpatient meetings going — with adjustments. He prefers them to virtual sessions anyway: Some peer-to-peer support just can't be replicated on telehealth platforms.

At New Bridge, a licensed counselor leads thrice-weekly meetings, which last three hours and take place in a big basement where people can stay 6 feet away from each other, Paoello said. Everyone wears face masks and has their temperature checked at the door.

“At first, the masks bothered me,” Lara said. “We're addicts. We hate change. But this is to save lives, and if you want to be a baby and go home, that's fine. But those who really want their recovery are going to sit in the basement with their masks on and walk through the fear — whatever it takes.”

“That personal interaction, that human connection, is so vital to recovery,” said Lara, who attends AA meetings via Zoom but prefers New Bridge's live group sessions. She asked that her last name not be used for privacy concerns. “For so long, as addicts and alcoholics, we've just isolated ourselves and committed social suicide.

“When we get together in a room for Alcoholics Anonymous, it's almost like magic happens,” she said. “When you have that face-to-face, you can reach out and touch somebody, it's just different than when it's virtual.”

There's also an element of trust among people who attend live AA meetings together. But virtual meetings can include people from around the country. And that might scare some people away from talking to the group, experts said.

New Bridge's voluntary sessions have nearly filled to pre-outbreak levels. People are having a hard time finding recovery — and they're grateful when Paoello welcomes them. He also connects participants with Elias' Children's Aid for additional attention.

"This is life or death," Paoello said. "This was the worst time for the pandemic to strike because we already had an epidemic going on."

Lara, who has an 11-year-old son, said she's grateful she entered detox before the pandemic hit. With her typical support networks like meetings or the gym stripped away, she relies on prayer sessions as a bulwark for her recovery.

She doesn't think she would have been able to get clean during the pandemic, she said. And now, in recovery, Paoello's outpatient care is her lifeline. She would be more depressed and less successful without it, she said.

She said she's not worried about being around others during the outbreak.

"Absolutely not. I was killing myself in active addiction," she said. "I'm going to do whatever God puts in front of me because nothing is worse than what I was doing before. There's nothing worse than shooting heroin every day.

"I was a walking zombie for so long," Lara added. "I will do whatever it takes to stay out of that hell."

The ReachNJ 24-hour hotline is at 1-844-REACHNJ.

The Children's Aid and Family Services 24-hour hotline is at 201-589-2976.

The Center for Addiction Recovery, Education and Success 24-hour support line is at 973-625-1143.

Hope One, which offers Narcan training via Zoom, is at 973-590-0300.

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