

A soldier in the battle against drug addiction

10 QUESTIONS WITH ... Billerica's new substance abuse coordinator Mike Higgins

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BILLERICA -- Town Manager John Curran has added yet another connection from his tenure as mayor of Woburn to the ranks at Billerica Town Hall: new substance-abuse coordinator Mike Higgins.

Higgins, who served for more than three decades as a probation officer in the Woburn District Court, has built up a veritable Rolodex of connections in combating the area's heroin epidemic.

Already at work in his part-time job, Higgins was on the phone with an addict seeking a treatment bed when The Sun arrived for an interview.

Q: What drew you to this area of expertise?

A: I just retired as a probation officer for 34 years on the Woburn court, and I ran what we call the HEAT program: Heroin Education and Awareness Task Force.

Q: Why has there been a recent uptick in heroin and opioid abuse?

A: It's always been a problem; now it's getting worse. It's a two-fold situation. The cops in society, the DEA, Walgreens and CVS have done their part ... In those days, back in 2006, they started paying attention, and they got to it...

Well, what that did was cause the heroin problem, because instead of spending \$80, you can spend \$10, up in Lawrence, and buy a bag of heroin and get the same high. What was happening was, the people were buying and snorting it. After about 30 days, you don't get high again from snorting, so they went to the needle. That's the epidemic.

Q: How does Lawrence factor into the area's heroin problem?

A: Lawrence is ground zero, as far as the DEA is concerned. It is the No. 1 area in influx of both use and sales of heroin, Lawrence. Bigger than New York. This is where it all comes out of. You might find some in Lowell, but it's all out of Lawrence.

Q: Is there anything about Billerica that has prompted you to change your approach?

A: No. Everything's an individual. My forte is finding beds. Over the last nine years doing that with the HEAT program, we've had the ability, through the state, to find good working relationships with a lot of the treatment programs ... Billerica is unique in that it is closer to Lawrence and Lowell, but this drug does not discriminate.

Q: How big is the stigma for addicts and their families?

A: There's a shame factor involved in coming forward to say, "My kid's an addict." And you can't handle it like you always try to do ... This is something that you have to get treatment for someone right away. They are addicts. They are addicted. They need a medical detox, and then you go from there.

Q: How do you prevent substance abuse among students?

A: Education. It has to be an education component.

Q: What can parents do to prevent that from happening?

A: Pay attention. Because it isn't the bad kid. It isn't the long-haired freak that looks greasy-haired and all. It isn't that. One of the dilemmas we have is the athlete, the athlete after an injury.

Q: When has your work touched you personally?

A: Recently, back in November, I lost one of my best friend's sons ... I told both parents not to blame themselves. It's the drug. These parents tried to do everything. They did everything within their power. They spent money, they sent him away, they did all of that.

The day of the wake, he had a dentist appointment, my friend. He goes into the dentist, and he tells the dentist what had just happened. The dentist did some gum work with him, and when he left, the dentist asked if he wanted a script of percocets. And he just looked at the guy and said, "I guess you didn't listen to a single word I said."

Q: Do you have a distaste for D.A.R.E. and the War on Drugs? It sounds like your approach is one more of understanding.

A: It's realistic. Realistic. D.A.R.E. didn't deal with what we do now ... But, I've got to say this much: At least Billerica had the foresight and the guts to look into this, admit they had a problem, see what they could do about it and went out and hired. I feel fortunate to be hired to do this. I think my main responsibility here is to find beds and education what I can, and same thing I did for HEAT for nine years, but do it for Billerica.

Q: What message do you want to bring to the public?

A: I want you to take my email and my number, in case anybody has any questions (978-671-0943, mhiggins@town.billerica.ma.us). I'm here. You might as well utilize it.

An addict wants to talk to somebody who they can trust, because if someone's going to talk to me, I'm not going to repeat it. It stays in here. If somebody asked me, I'm not going to say a word about it. That's the trust factor.

Read more: http://www.lowellsun.com/news/ci_27288476/soldier-battle-against-drug-addiction#ixzz3PJ7YXC5u