

BRATTLEBORO POLICE DEPARTMENT

62 BLACK MOUNTAIN ROAD

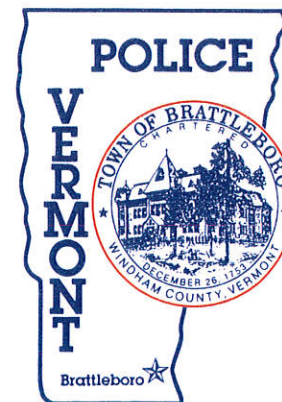
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To the People of Brattleboro:

For nearly a decade, our nation has watched the tragedy of the opioid crisis unfold. Unfortunately, we are now all too familiar with the staggering statistics on opioid overdoses. Brattleboro, located in Windham County, is the largest town in southeastern Vermont, home to 12,000 residents. In 2018, Windham County had the highest rate of overdose deaths in Vermont, making us one of the communities that the opioid crisis has hit the hardest.

Many individuals, agencies, and organizations have been addressing the opioid crisis independently. Those involved came to realize that greater collaboration was needed. To save lives, we needed to take a new approach to treating addiction. Like so many other cities and towns, our primary response had been increased law enforcement action, prosecution, and incarceration. It was clear that we needed to take a smarter approach to the opioid crisis that is rooted in the understanding that addiction is a disease, not a crime.

It was in this context that our community came together to address this epidemic through a creative and collaborative response which is focused on saving lives. This response is called Project CARE. A brochure summarizing Project CARE is enclosed with this letter.

The key to Project CARE's success is its willingness to take a compassionate new approach that employs a collective impact model. Facing unprecedented loss of life, we rejected outdated strategies that criminalize addiction in favor of treating addiction like the disease that it is. The Brattleboro Police Department along with other various agencies came together to embrace an all-hands-on-deck mentality that broke down silos and fostered productive relationships. We stepped out of our traditional roles to identify assets and gaps, assign appropriate roles, and chart a collaborative path forward.

Our comprehensive effort to address the opioid epidemic still includes law enforcement actions to reduce the availability of illegal substances. We are doing "traditional" police work to hold drug traffickers accountable. But, while we previously had few options for responding to risky substance use behaviors and the related hardships they cause, Project CARE now provides officers with a pathway to support individuals with substance use disorders.

Creating a support system for people impacted by substance misuse reduces the stigma of addiction and helps individuals in active addiction to enter and sustain recovery. People who are in recovery provide valuable support, hope, and advocacy for individuals in active addiction by sharing their stories and speaking out publicly. This is healing and empowering for participants.

Reducing the barriers to accessing treatment can help individuals take the first step toward recovery. Through proactive outreach, service providers can build long-term relationships with individuals in active addiction, provide information on available resources, and help connect them with treatment once they are ready to enter recovery. Our goal is to build a community of recovery and support through:

Education and Prevention to reduce stigma and raise public awareness and knowledge about the dangers of opioids use and misuse.

Treatment and Recovery to expand access to treatment and community supports for individuals in crisis.

Law Enforcement to decrease the supply of illegal opioids and other illicit drugs and to expand access to treatment options for those involved in the criminal justice system.

Project CARE team members proactively go door to door in high-risk areas. Including peer supporters amplifies the impact of this person to person contact. They visit those impacted by overdoses usually within 24 hours of an incident. Team members understand that addiction is a chronic illness. We understand the likelihood of relapse and that it may take many treatment attempts before someone remains in recovery. We also understand the stigma around addiction and that those suffering from the disease and their family members often lack people in whom they can confide. This knowledge guides our work.

Accessing treatment is often complicated. When we first started Project CARE, navigating treatment options and helping people enter treatment was an obstacle. One of our biggest accomplishments has been developing relationships at treatment facilities. The time the team has put into helping others find treatment has resulted in advanced knowledge of available treatment providers and strong relationships with individuals at those facilities. Securing transportation to treatment facilities continues to be a major barrier.

Opportunities abound to continue to improve our community's response to the opioid epidemic. First, there must be additional opportunities for harm reduction for those who are not prepared to enter treatment. Second, the continuum of care must be improved. Finally, we must remain nonjudgmental, immensely patient, and continue to combat the stigma of addiction within the community.

Though our work is just beginning, our story is a hopeful one. We are building a long-term path forward, setting up an infrastructure that positions us to respond to residents' substance misuse needs – both during this opioid epidemic and beyond. We will continue this work with compassion, resilience, and determination.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "M. Fitzgerald", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Michael R. Fitzgerald, Chief
Bristol Police Department