

County lands \$3M grant to fight addiction

Four nonprofits collaborate on effort

By JOHN FLOWERS
MIDDLEBURY — Addison County experienced an opioid-involved death rate of 40 per 100,000 residents in 2023 — nearly double Vermont’s statewide rate — and yet the county has no inpatient detoxification facility, no residential treatment program, and no hospital-based emergency psychiatric

services. An estimated 75% of individuals who need substance use disorder treatment don’t receive it. “Geographic isolation, provider shortages and pervasive stigma create compounding barriers that prevent individuals from entering and remaining in care,” reads a grant application submitted by the United Way of Addison County.

Now, through that application, UWAC has landed a \$3 million federal grant that will intensify local efforts to help folks battling substance use disorder. The Rural Communities Opioid Response Program grant, awarded through the Health Resources & Services Administration, will unlock \$750,000 during each of the next four years. It will fuel four Addison County nonprofits in their mission

to improve access to treatment and recovery services for those fighting addiction — including opioid use disorder. “There’s already so much good work happening in Addison County, and so many good partners doing this work really well,” UWAC Executive Director Helena Van Voorst said during an Oct. 8 meeting with the grant principals. “(The grant) is just
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THESE OFFICIALS REPRESENT organizations that will deploy the \$3 million grant, recently won by United Way of Addison County, to boost services for people struggling with substance use disorder. Pictured from left are Chelsea Delisle of the Charter House Coalition, Jubilee McGill and Danielle Wallace of the Peer Revery Center; United Way’s Celia Heath, Heidi Melbostad of Mountain Community Health, Helena Van Voorst of United Way, and Taylor Morley of the Counseling Service of Addison County.
Independent photo John Flowers

Addiction

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going to strengthen the connection between those servicers, so that if somebody needs help, there’s no wrong door; wherever they land, they’re going to be able to get the help they need.”

United Way applied for the grant and will serve as its fiscal agent. The four local nonprofits that will draw from the funds to ramp up substance use disorder-related services are:

- The Counseling Service of Addison County (CSAC), providing outpatient behavioral health treatment and workforce development.
- Mountain Community Health in Bristol, providing primary care and medication for opioid use disorder.
- Peer Recovery Center of Addison County (PRC), providing peer recovery support, overdose prevention, and street outreach.
- Charter House Coalition, providing emergency shelter, coordinated entry, and housing navigation.

Addison County’s rural character and a modest safety net for those struggling with drug addiction made this group a strong candidate for the grant award.

So how will the \$3 million in funding be deployed?

UWAC and its four nonprofit partners have a game plan that stresses identifying those needing help, engaging them, keeping them in treatment, measuring/maximizing positive outcomes, and getting them on a path to long-term recovery.

Early funding will provide for the purchase of a vehicle to ferry people to counseling and/or treatment; Narcan distribution; the hiring of two substance use disorder clinicians to be embedded at schools; making available opioid use disorder medication (Buprenorphine) prescribed through an Advanced Practice Registered Nurse at the PTC’s drop-in center; more telehealth opportunities; expanded peer recovery support through newly-hired specialists; more help for those seeking housing and related supports; and a countywide stigma-reduction campaign.

“What’s really exciting is that there are some tangible things that

are going to happen in year one that will have a huge impact,” Van Voorst said.

Danielle Wallace is executive director of the Peer Recovery Center, which will see a staffing and programming boost from the new federal resources. The organization is already shopping for an electric vehicle.

“Transportation is always a barrier, whether it’s getting someone to treatment, or helping them get to appointments,” Wallace explained, noting that public transportation can’t always reach folks in the most rural parts of the county in a timely fashion. A new hire at the PRC will, among other things, drive the new vehicle and help direct PRC guests to sobriety-related services.

In addition, the grant funds will allow PRC to expand its hours and bolster its street-outreach efforts. As recently reported by the *Independent*, new guardrails on state funds recently cut off funding for Addison County’s street outreach program.

Heidi Melbostad, CEO of Mountain Health, said the new grant resources will give patients more access to peer recovery, as well as more telehealth options for medication-assisted treatment.

“We know when we treat substance use disorders, we’re most effective when we can meet people wherever they are,” she said of the importance of telehealth.

In addition to adding a nurse practitioner, the funding will allow Mountain Health to bring on a nursing care coordinator. Once they cross Mountain Health’s threshold, they’ll also have access to the health center’s primary and dental care services.

“Substance use disorders are chronic condition, and they’re just one part of someone’s overall health and wellbeing,” Melbostad said.

Taylor Morley is executive director of CSAC. Morley noted the grant money will help CSAC pivot to a Vermont Certified Community-Based integrated Health Center. This kind of center offers a wide range of services, including 24/7 crisis care, outpatient mental health and substance use disorder treatment, primary care screening

and monitoring, and peer support services.

“As part of that change in our model, we are asked to do more with substance use disorder than we’ve done historically,” Morley said. “We view our role as being in collaboration with (Mountain Health) and Porter Hospital. We don’t see ourselves as becoming *the* primary provider in the county for those services, but we will be providing them to the folks we serve.”

HELP IN SCHOOLS

The new infusion of grant money will allow CSAC to train and credential its current staff on best-practices for substance-use prevention and treatment techniques, rather than hiring new employees, according to Morley.

CSAC officials have for years been assisting local schools with mental health supports. Now the organization will be able to hire two substance use disorder clinicians to help youth and young adults.

Morley anticipates those new clinicians will begin their roles next fall.

Meanwhile, Middlebury’s Charter House Coalition will be able to use part of the grant money to help homeless folks struggling with addiction.

Many guests who find their way to the Charter House Emergency Shelter at 27 N. Pleasant St. in Middlebury are dealing with addiction.

Chelsea Delisle is a Charter House staff member and housing coordinator. She’s grateful the new grant will fund two full-time positions, one of whom will help integrate substance use into the shelter’s screening process to better serve those so-afflicted and a housing specialist who will help guests transition to permanent abodes.

What happens after the grant expires?

Local stakeholders plan to build a solid foundation with what they’ll be receiving.

“While it’s a four-year grant, the work that’s going to happen will have a much longer impact on our community and create a really strong system that will last beyond the four years of funding,” Van Voorst said.