

Jackson County United Way: AmeriCorps United Against Opioids 2017-18 Community Conversations Substance Use Findings Report

Overview

From November 2017 - February 2018, the Jackson County United Way (JCUW) engaged 175 members of our community from all walks of life and backgrounds in 12 deep conversations about the kind of community we want Jackson County to be. People were honest, and willing to share, during these conversations, and for this we are deeply grateful. In return, JCUW is committed to broadly sharing what we heard so that anyone in our community who wants to take action can get involved.

This is what we've heard:

People's Shared Aspirations

Residents want a community where people *choose* to live, a community that is healthy and safe. They want a community that is *alive*, vibrant and growing with places to go and things to do. We want to be known as a place *where we work together for solutions* to take care of our neighbors and generations.

"EVERYONE wants to live in an active, vibrant community."

"Church and community leaders have to be involved. Everyone needs to get involved."

"I think when a community that works together, you feel safe. There are places to go and things to do; and you are not afraid to walk down the street, because you take care of each other."

"I have put too many kids in the ground from drugs and alcohol."

"Having a general respect throughout the community no matter who the person is. That is important."

"To keep the community alive and growing, we need the entire community to achieve this."

Main Concerns

Here are the things that came up in most conversations and *specific voices that were echoed over and over*:

The Community is Affected, Stigma of Substance Use

Every day our community and each resident is affected by substance use in some way. Many times people don't even realize they have been, *"Everyone is affected in some way by drug users."* When talking to specific populations, we heard over and over, *"safety for our staff is a main concern"* from health care, *"nurses face physical abuse and the emergency room is terrifying sometimes."* to social services *"we're concerned a staff member will be poked by a hidden, used needle"*.

There is a loud cry for community members to band together and start to change social norms, right now, *"the norm is: I don't have a job, I use drugs, my parents support me."* and *"Family members who are not using, push the person that is using, farther and farther away."*

There are many stigmas about substance use, and families that need help are afraid to confide in others because of judgment. *"My mom's whole side of the family is on drugs. I don't want to be shunned."* and *"There is damage to all of the family. It's not just the person that is using the drugs."* When people talked about the issue, they also noted that it affects all income levels. *"Everyone has to be willing to not believe that it's only in lower incomes. It can be anybody."* and *"By not having affordable treatment options for all people- it is saying that my child isn't worth saving and that is not okay."* People who want to help those in active use also shared, *"The stigma is so bad that helping others is limited,"* but we must *"separate the who- from the do."* While those in active recovery urged others to consider the way they label and treat others, *"We believe these negative labels upon us and we carry that around."* People in the community also note, *"We have shut them off from every opportunity for help, for years due to their label, especially if they have a felony."*

Lives Ruined, Family Members are Dying-

Lives are ruined because of substance use- and ruined in a variety of ways. *"The loss of young lives, premature death, the health side, mental health, physical health, and the other family members who are suffering."* And *"I look at these people and it is so depressing to see the complete lack of engagement. They just look dead. They look like nothing is happening in their eyes."* People are concerned because, *"We are losing lives. This is a huge problem."* Residents throughout the county shared, *"More deaths- both overdoses and suicides have skyrocketed this year; it is not talked about."* It is important for the community to know these people dying are someone's family and every life is important to save. *"My mom had to have 4 doses of Narcan."* *"My mom's cousin just died of an overdose."* *"One of my friends has OD four times and he is 19."* and *"Seeing friends that I have grown up with are tearing themselves apart. You don't want to end that friendship because you want to help them so much."*

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Treatment & Recovery-

People shared over and over the need for treatment options and recovery resources. *"We want people to get help but we have no resources here."* and *"There is a lack of treatment options especially if you don't have health insurance or quick access to \$10-12,000, people that need treatment cannot get it."* One of the barriers to treatment and recovery is the cost for paying for these services. With an *"already overtaxed health system, the cost of paying for treatment comes back to the county. This is a huge burden of cost."* And another barrier is when people do say they want help, there are limited options usually 1-2 hours away. *"Every treatment facility has a waiting list, it might take 3 months to get someone in treatment. Transportation to the treatment center is also a huge barrier."* When people are in Medicated Assisted Treatment (MAT), *"treatment becomes their job due to driving to New Albany or Indy because of the lack of options in the county. How can we expect this person to get a job and take care of her baby?"*

People who have been arrested and are in jail or on house arrest should have options for inpatient treatment, *"There are not many rehabs for people on house arrest because it is so expensive. Inpatient treatment would be more beneficial than arrest."* and *"They need inpatient treatment. Outpatient is not going to work."* People in active recovery, current use, and in jail shared, *"If a drug user comes into the jail and wants help, there are no support systems, no insurance connections, and THERE IS NO WAY OUT."* People also said, *"When my brother was arrested and sent to jail, it was a huge relief. I knew he was safer there; but when he came out he had lost his job, had no insurance, and had a felony on his record making it nearly impossible to find help and housing. How is he supposed to stop?"* While other community members shared, *"There is nothing in Jackson County to help addicts. There is nothing for rehab, treatment, and support after incarceration."*

People also said there needs to be different types of recovery, *"It is important for every community to have different strokes for different folks whether Alcoholic Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Medicaid Assisted Treatment, or Celebrate Recovery. Not one thing works for everybody; everybody is different and there need to be lots of choices."* People also talked about the importance of strong community support and transportation to recovery meetings, *"Having a good support group makes or breaks an addict in recovery."* and *"Buses pick up people for church, why not pick people up for recovery meetings?!?"* and *"I know a lot of pastors steer clear of people in recovery because they do not understand it, but they don't realize they have church members struggling."*

Care for Others & Supportive Services-

"People care but they don't know what to do." There is a lack of knowledge of how to help others who are in active use or current recovery or where people can turn for support. Residents continued to share, *"People that are using need to know they can depend on us and we care. The information needs to be available and accessible for how to get help."*

People in active recovery shared, *"It is the hardest thing I will ever do in my life and it is a daily battle. I need people to be patient and support me."* and *"People need to really understand addiction before they say 'I'll be there for you' –people aren't capable of just stopping. It's a disease that is overwhelming; there are going to be slip-ups."* People also are asking for help to change the stigma, *"Recovery needs to be something that is glorified."* and *"I need a recovery success story as a guide to keep me sober."*

As the community thinks more about how to help, people in recovery have said they don't feel included in the community and need to know from others that they aren't being pushed out but actively pulled in. People said, *"I get out of jail tomorrow. I have nowhere to go. My mom died and I have no family. There is no halfway house. I have already failed and I know that. I have nothing. There is nothing for me."* While others said, *"We have to bring them in and treat them as friends; perhaps we can do this through churches, when someone gets out of jail, they step into church and a community that cares about their recovery."*

People in the community also talked about syringe exchange with differing voices, *"It is sad our politicians have to have a needle exchange."* and *"Needle exchange is not to support drug use; it is to keep diseases down."* When the community talked about how we can make progress, *"I'll tell you what's not going to help is that needle exchange, it is going to stop and interfere with progress."* However others shared, *"The needle exchange is about saying I care about you and I don't want you to get a disease. The fact is they are talking to someone who is a familiar face, as they are getting screened for HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C, and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD); the whole idea behind this is when they are ready they can ask for help. The needle exchange program is designed for one thing and that is to stop the spread of diseases; it does not increase the number of overdoses."*

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Community Wide Public Awareness-

People went on to describe how they see others in the community viewing the substance use issue. *"The general public does not know how bad the problem is and they don't have an understanding of the problem."* As the substance use issue has grown there is a lack of interest in the topic, *"used to be you'd call the paper and get the bust on the front page, we don't call anymore because they don't run it...it's normal now."* With the lack of awareness there are concerns, *"My neighbors probably wouldn't know what drugs look like."* including that people are choosing to ignore the issue, *"Our community does not want to hear it. Some people just ignore it and don't care."* and *"The Brownstown community does not want recovery options in their neighborhood because they don't want that population in their neighborhood, but what they don't realize is that population is already there right next door."*

As people continued to talk many called for community-wide education and awareness campaigns, *"Parents of school-aged children need to know more about what is accessible in the community, signs and symptoms to look for, and how to talk and teach their children about substance use starting in Kindergarten."* and *"This information needs to be just as accessible and shared as frequently as the free and reduced lunch paperwork."*

Reasons they Begin Using & Continue to Use-

People talked a lot about why people begin to use substances. Some people shared, *"It's not a disease. Addiction is a choice; it's a choice every time. Nobody wakes up and wants to get cancer, people wake up and choose to use drugs."* While others shared, *"I started by taking a prescription from my doctor after a surgery."* People in active recovery, current use, and in jail shared a lot about why they started from not having coping mechanisms to trauma in their life, *"I had problems and I just didn't know how to handle them like everybody else."* and *"I started because I was sexually abused."* and *"...because my mom died."* and others said, *"People are just looking for a way to numb the pain."* and *"It's more acceptable to use drugs than not to use. People are immune to it and it has become the social-norm."*

People also shared more about why they continue to use from stress and anxiety as well as, *"Guilt, shame, and remorse makes me want to start using again. It is a vicious cycle. It messes with my brain."* and *"I've used for so long; I have to use again to level out so I feel normal again. I don't feel normal unless I am high. I don't even know who I am anymore."*

People also shared that if there were, *"more felony friendly opportunities for work."* it would help people stay out of current use, but currently, *"Companies will hire us and as soon as our background check comes back after 3 weeks, we lose our job."* While other community members shared, *"as soon as a person gets 2-3 paychecks, they've gotten enough money saved up that they leave and go back to using."* People also shared, *"If I work mandatory overtime seven days a week, I have no time for my family or any fun; so for a quick 'getaway' I use."*

Generational Substance Use-

People also shared how common generational substance use is in Jackson County. *"I have been raised around drugs all of my life. If mom is doing it, why wouldn't I do it?"* *"I am one of ten kids, six of my siblings abuse alcohol and drugs."* While others share, *"My stepdad was a heroin addict and police were constantly at our house growing up. We were told not to say anything to anyone, especially at school."* and *"Parents are hosting parties and smoking dope with their children."*

While others may not have substance use in their homes, they do have family members who are. *"I have an aunt that was in drug use. Two years later she lost her kids to foster care and lost her house."* And another, *"My aunt went crazy because of drug money. She robbed a store and is in jail. Now, I have my two cousins living with me."*

People also shared, *"Generations of children are affected by this and without intervention it will cycle and cycle and cycle."* and *"I worry about what kind of children we are raising and what kind of parents they will be 20 years from now."* We also heard concerns from grandparents, *"I am raising three of my grandchildren. They go to counseling and they are emotionally messed up."* And also, *"It affects my other (adult) children; they have a lot of anger because of their sister's behavior."*

People continue to urge, *"If you can save a couple people, you are potentially saving an entire family."*

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Accessibility to Drugs-

People talked a lot about how easy it is to get drugs. Drugs are found everywhere throughout the county in workplaces, schools, libraries, and gas stations. People in rural locations of the county said, *"We need more police presence to cut back on drugs running into town. It is coming from all over."*

People talked about how they could make a call and in 5 minutes meet up with someone for the drug of their choice. *"My Snapchat and Facebook is full of people using. You can easily share something and be connected or say, 'Hey, I want some of that, meet me at this place.' and it's as easy as that."* Parents need to be aware of how accessible drugs are in the life of their child, *"I'm concerned that it is so easily available to children at the elementary schools- everywhere. It's in every community I have lived in the past 10 years."* When we asked a room full of teens, *"If you decided you wanted to try drugs tonight. Do you know who you would call?"*, their response, *"Yes, I have the person in my phone and they are a good friend."* They continued, *"I'm still friends with them because I want to be able to help them and don't want to write off their bad decisions."* Teens also shared that they have multiple friends that are using or selling, *"Five people may use the same needle at a party."* and *"It is \$7 for a hit of heroin at school."*

Youth Prevention, Lack of Parental Supervision, and Child Safety-

People talked about how we must prevent substance use from starting, specifically with youth in our community. Many people talked about what prevention activities would help, most voices pointed to ensuring there are more things to do and places to go, *"We need things that entertain kids."* and *"There is no bowling alley or skating rink anymore."* and *"There are not a lot of resources for them when they are out in the community, there is not a whole lot unless you take your kid to Columbus- and our kids don't live in Columbus they live here."* People also were quick to mention how much prevention education already happens in the school and added, *"It should be mandatory for counselors to see every child at school to identify family issues especially with drugs and alcohol."* People also talked about how afterschool programming would be beneficial in school districts throughout the county, *"They have lots of afterschool opportunities in Seymour, but what about if you are 12 years old and living in Vallonia or Freetown?"*

People also talked about how important parent supervision is as a piece of youth prevention, *"Some parents have done very little- especially when both parents work and they work a lot of hours."* If parents are working 50-60 hours a week, they don't have energy to take them to a basketball game. *"If you live in town it might be easy to get to the game anyway, but if you live in out of town, you are not going to get to the game if your parents are sitting around doing dope."* Nearly all people were in agreement that, *"Core family values have got to come back."* and *"Grandparents raising their grandkids is becoming a social norm."*

While many people also shared the importance of parents connecting with children, *"Nobody puts forth the effort- it takes 5 minutes to read your child a bedtime story."* and *"Parents should take the time to talk to their kids. A lot of parents do not take the initiative and some parents are in denial."* Many people talked about how to keep their children safe and how their behavior actually does the opposite. *"Moms and dads put their head in the sand and say 'not my child'"* -or worst they stick up for their child instead of allowing them to get in trouble and face the consequences. *"A party got busted with over 20 youth; five belonged to my congregation and not one parent or one child said one word to me. That concerns me! What is going to be the outcome?"* We must ensure all children are kept safe and the long-term goal is for them to learn from mistakes and make better choices- one youth said it this way, *"Don't use scare tactics, but have real conversations with impact and make a student remember this talk."*

Crime & Lack of understanding of the Criminal Justice System-

People told us they had experienced an increase in crime, specifically theft. *"To feed their drug habit, they are stealing. They will steal anything."* and *"Last week, a house that we are renovating got broken into- you know it's related to drug use. They stole all of our tools and you know they are using these to pawn, sell, or trade for drugs."*

When people talked about reporting to the police many shared they weren't sure that anything happens when they do, *"People here complain, I tell them to contact the police and they say that they have and the police will not do anything."* While others shared, all residents need to understand the way the criminal justice system works. *"Keeping them in jail is not in the power of the police."* And still others, *"People need to know how to be a better witness; stay on the phone until we get there- take a picture, get the license plate number and a vehicle description."* and *"People get aggravated with me... they don't realize, I have to have multiple deals in order to make the case better when it goes to*

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trial.” While others shared how hard it is to change the way people think, “Someone lied and got their sentence doubled. It’s hard for these folks to learn to be honest and do the right thing.”

People also shared concerns of the way some people are prosecuted, sentenced, and what happens during probation. *“It’s ordinary not to charge dealers longer than one year. This is a shift in thinking from sentencing.” “A guy just received nine months for three counts of dealing.” and “You don’t have a chance in Jackson County being on probation. Probation is set-up for failure. There is nothing in between jail and probation.”*

People shared, *“I am really tired of hearing ‘arrest them’ and ‘throw them in jail’. It has been apparent for years and years that that does not help.” and “Let’s do something besides let them sit in there and rot and become better criminals.”* People clearly demanded the need for treatment options in jail, *“There are a lot of people that go into jail and they don’t get help.” and “We want to get people treatment, but we don’t have treatment, those places don’t exist, so now it’s called jail.”* We need *“programs in the jail like one on one meetings with the inmates; or to provide Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or Celebrate Recovery.”*

We heard people in jail and those in active recovery, *“I want to stay here because I know I can stay sober. I am happy in jail. I am on my medicine and I am sober.”* While others shared, *“My lawyer told me to bond out and then he can get me into rehab. Why is that? Why do I have to get out before I go to rehab?!?”*

People & Trust in Groups & Organizations

People continue to believe that a team effort is necessary to make a change with this issue. They indicate that the community must become educated and informed on the topic. They say, *“Everybody should have a stake in this issue. There is not one organization that can do it alone.”*

People say they will trust in people who are in recovery and have lived experience. Community members also said when churches get involved; this will create an attitude change with people being respectful and feeling respected.

People want to see Progress

Residents are overwhelmed by this issue and have seen lots of conversations and groups pop up without much to show for it. For people to believe this time will be different, they need to see there are opportunities for all residents to get engaged and make a difference in their community.

When people were asked what kinds of things would sense a change these things were noted:

- People want to see more recovery options for all people. They specifically noted that if inmates are in jail anyway there should be the option for them to receive treatment and there was a specific voice that identified teenagers needed treatment options available.
- People want to build healthy relationships at family friendly events throughout the county. They also specifically noted more events need to be available for families to connect in all parts of the county, especially Brownstown, Crothersville, Freetown, and Medora.
- People want others to learn more about this issue, how it is affecting all members of our community, how we can rally together to create positive messages of hope, and how we can create opportunities for people in recovery to gather publicly.

What do you think?

We’d love to hear from you to understand what you think about the information we’ve heard. Please let us know what you think and answer these questions in order for our whole county to move forward on what residents see as the opportunity for hope and possibility.

1. What do you make of what we are learning?
2. What are the implications for the work that each of us does in our community?
3. Where could we use what we are learning?
4. What possibilities are there for moving ahead?

Contact Us

If you have questions about this information. Contact Tonja Couch, Jackson County United Way Executive Director, tonja@jacsy.org or Kimberly Buck, United Against Opioids AmeriCorps Member, americorps@jacsy.org or 812-522-5450.