



Alabama should replace failed 'war on drugs' incarceration strategy with rehabilitation approach (Opinion from Clete Wetli)



These are some of the prescription drugs collected in a National Prescription Drug Take-Back event in Huntsville. (File/Dave Dieter/The Huntsville Times)



By [Clete Wetli](#)

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One of the most dangerous and alarming trends in Alabama is the skyrocketing use of prescription opioid pain-killers, which tragically correlates to higher incidences of criminality, addiction, overdose and death.

These prescription pain-killers are in the same narcotic family as morphine and heroin. Drugs like hydrocodone, oxycodone, tramadol and fentanyl.

Addicts are typically not two-dimensional Hollywood archetypes who are portrayed as filthy intravenous junkies under a bridge; they come from all walks of life and you probably personally know a few of them. Odds are high that someone in your family, a co-worker or one your friends has a problem with prescription pain-killers.

Some doctors and clinics are handing this stuff out like candy that might as well be put in a Pez dispenser. No one ever questions the pharmaceutical corporate giants behind a massive pill proliferation that incentivizes doctors to prescribe them unnecessarily. The blame is always placed squarely on the addict.

Many people get their pills legitimately with a prescription, but others discover that there is vast and lucrative underground market for pain-killers. Some can be purchased starting at \$3 a pop from dealers, friends or even relatives.

In fact, in a 2010 study by Express Scripts, Alabamians use prescription narcotics at a rate that is more than 60 percent higher than the rest of the nation. There has also been an upwardly trending spike in opioid-related deaths and overdoses throughout America.

Yet, Alabama continues to significantly defund and under-staff mental health treatment as well as substance abuse prevention and treatment programs. Politicians continue to stigmatize addiction and ignore proven, evidence-based solutions to a growing crisis. Foolishly, they seem zealously committed to the failed, and excessively expensive, "War on Drugs" by continually opting for incarceration over rehabilitation.

Alabama needs to start dealing with its drug problem and stop using the issue as political tool.

An overwhelming amount of research shows that one of the most effective treatment modalities for opioid addiction is medication assisted treatment (MAT). Non-intoxicating drugs, like methadone, are used to replace drugs that cause severe mental impairment, like heroin. Methadone allows users to function in their daily lives without the effects of severe withdrawal. The medication is administered under clinical supervision. The users do not get "high" and, in many cases, they can gradually decrease dosage to stop altogether. MAT includes ongoing medical supervision, case management and counseling for opiate addicts who are trying to turn their lives around.

MAT works on the principle of harm reduction, which recognizes that not all people who are addicted to substances are capable of abrupt cessation. Harm reduction is a pragmatic and therapeutic approach to help people with addiction issues. It does not reward bad behavior or poor choices, but it does seek to mitigate their effects. It is a strategic approach that deals with people "where they are" and seeks to minimize the harm they cause to themselves and society.

Alabama needs to start dealing with its drug problem and stop using the issue as political tool. In 2009, it happened in DeKalb County when politicians used fear tactics and stereotypes to prevent a MAT clinic from opening. There were claims that it would just attract addicts from everywhere and wreak havoc on the community. Well, guess what? They are already there, but just not getting the help. Stigmatizing and ostracizing people who have drug-related problems only serves to create larger barriers that keep them from seeking the treatment they desperately need.

Treating addiction is certainly a complex endeavor and some places do a much better job than others. The issue is that not all addictions can be treated the same way and not all people seeking treatment have the same issues or level of severity. There are great and diverse programs in our community like Huntsville Recovery Inc., The Pathfinder Inc., and the Mental Health Center of Madison County that all work thanklessly to help individuals transform their lives and become productive members of society.

In Alabama, the time has come for a real intervention in which we face the fact our population has an increasing problem with prescription pain-killers. The answer is not to bury our heads in the sand and pretend the problem will go away. We can't lock everyone up either. Instead, let's increase access to treatment and use harm reduction principles to make our community safer.

In Alabama, we need to take a hard look around and realize that our "zero tolerance" policies are only making a bad situation worse. Even "abstinence-only" treatment advocates like Hazelden have done an about face and now fully support MAT. This type of treatment has been proven effective and it's hard to argue with its success. MAT is not "just replacing one drug for another;" it is a comprehensive and effective therapy that changes lives for the better.

It's time to let go of the stereotypes. Besides, you're probably talking about someone you already know. The bottom line is that harm reduction and MAT works and Alabama needs more of it.

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