

Margaret Chase Smith Library 2017 Essay Contest

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The essay prompt for 2017 was, How would you address the current lethal drug epidemic? The essays have been edited for length.

FIRST-PLACE ESSAY

Crusade against the Drugs, Not the Users

by Gabrielle Kyes

Maine has become a hub for illicit drug use, especially use of opiates, an umbrella term for a variety of drugs including oxycodone, methadone, codeine, morphine, and heroin. They are deadly drugs, which destroy people's lives. Opiate use, particularly heroin use, has been on the rise for a number of years. A profile of substance abuse trends in Maine, published in July 2015, states, "the number of drug offense arrests related to heroin quadrupled from 2010 to 2014" (Hornby Zeller 2015). Tackling opiate addiction needs to be a priority for Maine. We must lead addicts to recovery and end the cycle of addiction.

It is now common knowledge that New England has a drug problem, especially to drug dealers originating in New York. They have targeted New Englanders, causing an increase in what's known as "hillbilly heroin," a term used to describe the perceived demographic to which these dealers are selling. Dealers are taking advantage of the uneducated, low-income people who are already addicted to legal opioids: prescription painkillers. Many people addicted to prescription pain medication have started to rely on illegal drugs because of increased restrictions on doctors prescribing such strong painkillers and the high prices of these prescriptions. Researchers have

found that social determinants, such as poverty, incomplete education, and unemployment, are strongly correlated with drug abuse. A growing number of people attempt to find relief in heroin and other opiates, despite the major health risks.¹

From 2012 to 2014, there were 10.2 arrests related to heroin by the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency for every 100,000 residents in the state of Maine (Hornby Zeller 2015). Incarceration of people afflicted by addiction is a large part of this ever-growing problem in the state of Maine because while in prison, addicts do not have access to counseling or drug-addiction-specific medical attention, both vital to their recoveries. Because imprisoned drug addicts miss these key treatments, once released, they usually fall back into using. At that point, it is no longer a conscious choice. The body believes it needs a substance to survive, even though the substance is deadly.

One of the common treatments for heroin addiction is prescription methadone. Its effects can last up to 24 hours, so daily doses to curb the need for heroin are often recommended by health professionals. However, like any drug, methadone can cause problems. Arguably, methadone is worse than heroin: it is even more addictive and has

worse withdrawal symptoms, including coma and death (Good 2016).

Although some heroin addicts have successfully used methadone as a tool to recovery, there are also many instances of methadone dependency and deaths related to this supposed recovery drug. Other former heroin addicts often refer to methadone users as "lifers" because it is unlikely that they will ever stop using this substitute (Good 2016). Finding an effective, permanent solution or cure to opiate addiction, rather than allowing addicts to become dependent on yet another substance, is the next step to solving the drug crisis. With less drug-dependence and addiction, more people are bound to be productive citizens who contribute positively to society. Instead of combatting drug use by incarcerating addicts and simply expecting them to stop using, we must show them we are on their side and confront sources of the problem with them by creating effective treatment and support programs.

As an individual who has personally seen how addiction can ruin a person's life and who has researched the severity of the situation in Maine, I propose a few things.

- Provide literature regarding addiction, how to cope with it, how to cope with loved ones struggling with it, how to find help for yourself or a loved one. The information needs to be easily yet discreetly accessible. There also needs to be easily accessed, organized places for people to turn in their drug paraphernalia without fear of judgment, prosecution, or legal action. The people of Maine have a right to such information that can quite easily help them save a life.

- Pass legislation requiring insurance companies to cover treatment and rehab for addiction. With the strong correlation between poverty and drug addiction, many addicts cannot get the help they need because they don't have enough money to pay for the services they so desperately need. No person should be denied life-saving medical care. It is inhumane for the government to allow people to suffer through this disease without help.
- Decriminalize the use of drugs like heroin and work to rid our state of opioid dealers who profit off the sickness of others. Those who are addicted need help, and those who create the addicted need help too. They may use themselves, and their crimes do not justify society taking away their access to medical treatment or drug counseling. However, those who are not using must be held accountable for the deaths from overdoses that they caused by selling heroin or other opioids. They have no excuse for preying on those who are ill.
- Make treatment and rehab centers more accessible, especially in rural Maine. Quality treatment centers are often quite a long drive away from those in need, and many people do not always have access to transportation. I propose a shuttle bus system that can bring addicts to a facility near them.

There is a heavy stigma surrounding addicts; many people are quick to judge addicts because they are ignorant of the nature of the disease. People who struggle with addiction are just that: people. They make mistakes, they slip

up, but they do deserve a chance for redemption. If we as a society can stand beside addicts, create policies to help them get better, provide them with quality medical care, rehabilitate them, and assist them in assimilating into their communities so that they may become functioning and productive members of society once again, Maine will become an even better place. 🐟

ENDNOTE

- 1 Information in this paragraph comes from the Rehab International website, American Cities with the Highest Addiction Rates. <http://rehab-international.org/drug-addiction/american-cities-with-the-highest-addiction-rates> [Accessed March 9, 2017]

REFERENCES

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- Hornby Zeller Associates, Inc. 2015. Substance Abuse Trends in Maine: State Epidemiological Profile 2015. Produced for Maine Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services, Augusta. <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/samhs/osa/documents/SEOWEpiProfile2015FINALDRAFT.pdf>



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