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Don't marginalize addicts seeking help

Telegraph, The (Nashua, NH) - Sunday, December 27, 2009

In 2001, The Telegraph published a widely applauded investigative series by staff writer Hattie Bernstein that was headlined "Vanishing Options: The demise of addiction treatment in New Hampshire."

The series looked at the impact of the closing of the state's private treatment centers and the push for legislation that would guarantee parity in the insurance coverage of alcohol and drug dependency and other mental illnesses.

The series outlined how treatment options have all but disappeared in the state. Things have not become any better since then, and in many ways, have grown worse.

Now, Nashua is considering a measure that would further restrict new treatment centers and could even disrupt or destroy some of the programs currently available ("City panel tables treatment center plan," Dec. 22).

Mayor Donnalee Lozeau sponsored the ordinance, which was tabled after a public hearing on Tuesday. Speakers at the public hearing said the proposed legislation, which would allow treatment centers only along portions of ...the F.E. Everett Turnpike, Amherst Street and other busy roadways far removed from downtown, would marginalize people needing treatment for addiction and could even cause some existing programs to shut down.

The legislation was rushed into committee to start a 120-day clock that would prevent a methadone clinic from being established under the less restrictive existing ordinance at a vacant storefront on Main Street. Once legislation is proposed, the 120-day rule prevents an individual or developer from submitting a proposal to skirt the new requirements. This gives the city a three-month window to approve the legislation.

It's never a good idea to create new public policy based on a single land-use request or situation without input from stakeholders. Fortunately, Lozeau's proposal was tabled to allow more input from those who know the most about how addiction counseling and recovery services operate in Nashua.

Those voices were heard loud and clear at the public hearing, and they were universal in their opinion that the legislation is ...too broad and could result in many unanticipated consequences. Many of the treatment options available through local hospitals, nonprofit groups and private organizations would be at risk.


There may be a case for some restrictive zoning surrounding methadone clinics, but this legislation affecting all drug and alcohol treatment goes too far.

Keystone Hall, which has ...treated thousands of people for addiction in its 20-year tenure on Pine Street Extension, could have ...to rethink expansion plans. Even Alcoholics Anonymous meetings at downtown churches and collaborative treatment programs at the city's two hospitals could be affected.

City officials should be working to create more treatment options rather than restricting those we have.

The war on drugs has filled our prisons with non-violent drug offenders, most of whom would stand a far better chance of rehabilitation through treatment rather than incarceration.

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Medical research has confirmed that addiction is most often a medical condition, not a character flaw. Addicts who receive residential treatment, followed by outpatient care and membership in a 12-step group for up to two years, have high success rates.

Sixty percent to 80 percent of people with mental illness also suffer from an addiction.

That's one reason Ed Kirby, whose son has a mental illness, spoke up against the legislation and made his point very effectively.

"It concerns me greatly that people with addictions are being treated as second-class citizens," he told aldermen. "People with an addiction are part of the community. They deserve to be part of the community."

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