

A Pastoral Response to the Substance Abuse Epidemic was held on May 14, 2016 at Christ the King Seminary in East Aurora, NY. The event was co-sponsored by the Diocese of Buffalo's Pro-Life Office and WNY United Against Drug and Alcohol Abuse.

Our inspiration: The Holy Father's designation of this year as the Jubilee Year of Mercy and the belief that our friends involved in a variety of ministries are an important part of the solution to our community's substance abuse crisis.

What we set out to do: We set out to help those who are involved in a variety of ministries to better assist individuals and families who are seeking to prevent, treat and maintain recovery from substance use disorder.

The advertising for the event promised:

This *free* conference will help participants

- Understand: Learn about the substance abuse epidemic
- Encounter: Gain skills to engage and assist your neighbors
- Serve: Share your concerns and plan for a better tomorrow

What we did: Six speakers told the story of their encounters with substance use disorder and suggested practical steps that everyone at the conference could take to be part of a pastoral solution. The topics and speakers were:

What's going on and how did we get here?

- Cheryl Calire, Office of Pro-Life Activities
 - From my office, in my life, and why the Church community matters
- Aaron Naegely, Erie County Sheriff's Department
 - What I'm seeing, what the numbers are telling us, why heroin and why the civic community matters

Help is available and it works if you work it

- Maura Beres, Clinical Supervisor Outpatient Chemical Dependency, Msgr. Carr Institute
 - Addiction & treatment 101
- Fr. Marty Moleski, Calix
 - 12 step programs for recovery and for others whose lives are affected by S.U.D.

What can we do?

Sr. Johnice Rzadkiewicz, Response to Love Center

- How do I respectfully engage those I encounter and get them the help they need?
- Avi Israel, Save the Michaels of the World, Inc.
 - My son Michael, reducing stigma, increasing involvement

The event was coordinated and emceed by Sue Boyle, Community Mobilization Specialist for WNY United Against Drug and Alcohol Abuse and parishioner at St. George's RC Church. Sue facilitated participation in the national "I choose" campaign. Each participant chose and committed to a course of action based on the information they received.

What we accomplished: 70+ people from throughout the diocese of Buffalo attended. About half of the attendees self-identified as Roman Catholic and most others represented non-Catholic Christian churches and ministries.

Conference attendees committed to several activities. These include: prayer, including holding prayer services at their church; bringing the information received back to their community, their workplaces and their places of worship; helping someone seek treatment; and joining coalitions in their community.

In response to the survey collected at the end of the conference:

- “How useful was this conference”: 100% of the respondents rated it as 7 or above on a scale of 1 to 10. 78% chose 10, the highest available score.
- “I better understand addiction.” - 97% agreed or strongly agreed
- “I understand the substance abuse epidemic.” - 100% agree or strongly agree
- “I know how to communicate with someone who needs help.” - 91% agree or strongly agree
- “I know better what to do if someone asks for help.” - 97% agreed or strongly agreed
- “I know how to get help.” - 84% agreed or strongly agreed
- Regarding their plan to take action following the event:
 - Join a coalition – 30% answered “yes”
 - Bring education information back to my community – 58% answered “yes”
 - Advocate for policy change - 47% answered “yes”
 - Look for recovery programs - 35% answered “yes”
 - Help reduce the stigma associated with the epidemic - 38% answered “yes”
 - Follow through with my “I choose” commitment - 38% answered “yes”
- 100% rated the presentation as Excellent (4 out of 4 (85%)) or Good (3 out of 4 (15%)) when asked on a scale of 1 – 4 “How would you rate the presentation overall?”

The Pastoral Response event generated positive media coverage, including articles in *The Buffalo News*, *WNY Catholic* and several *Bee Newspapers*.

What’s next? We will follow up with the participants by email to help them follow through with their action plans. We will assist anyone who wants to host an informational event or a prayer service. Already, we know of 2 participants who went to 12 step meetings as a result of attending the event and one church that is holding an informational meeting. WNY United has resources on-line to help people find more information about prevention, treatment and support through recovery, including support group meeting schedules.

What else can we do?

- Organize more educational and action oriented events in a variety of locations with information that has been tailored to meet the needs of specific ministries such as pastors, church secretaries, youth-group leaders and catechists.
- Supply prayer intentions for Masses and send information to groups such as the Rosary Altar Society asking for prayers.
- Provide ongoing information for bulletin inserts.
- Meet with parish leaders to discuss their needs and possible solutions or resources available.