

Corey: Finding solutions to parental drug misuse requires sharing of stories

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Michele Corey (Photo: Courtesy photo)

Tens of thousands of Michiganders are among the tens of millions of Americans who are struggling with substance use disorders as the opioid crisis consumes our nation's attention and resources.

But what of the impact on children born to – and living with – parents entangled in this overwhelming challenge?

Nationwide, the American Academy of Pediatrics estimates 8.7 million children have a parent who suffers from a substance use disorder leading to higher foster care placements due to abuse and neglect, serious health problems for infants born into substance use, and trauma which left unaddressed could lead to concerns during childhood and adulthood.

Once in the foster care system, youth with parents who use substances tend to experience a higher likelihood of problems themselves. In one year alone, between 2016 and 2017, Michigan experienced an 8% increase in children entering the foster care system due to their parent's drug misuse, with more than a third (36%) of all removals statewide, according to a Child Trends publication from February 2019.

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Half of the child removal cases in the first two months of this year in Ingham County came from homes where substance use disorder was identified, according to the Ingham County Health Department's Opioid Surveillance Report from February 2019.

Finding real solutions that help families and protect children is why Michigan's Children and the Children's Trust Fund within the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services have organized a series of statewide public hearings hosted by the state's Citizen Review Panel on Prevention (CRPP).

The first hearing launched on Child Abuse Prevention Awareness Day in Lansing late last month; a second followed at the statewide Suicide Prevention Conference in Roscommon early this month and more are planned for the fall.

There is also an online engagement option, created by Michigan's Children for those who aren't able to come in person or prefer to share their views anonymously.

These panels are required in each state to provide opportunities for citizens to share their experiences to help ensure states are protecting children and youth and helping to stabilize families.

We've heard from dozens of social workers, mental health experts and other service providers so far and the testimony points to a public system that is so underfunded it routinely fails to help youth and families desperate from prevention and interventions.

A health care system that stigmatizes and doesn't acknowledge parity between mental illness and physical health frequently leaves us ineffective in our response to substance use disorder, categorized as a mental illness.

What we're learning from hearings is that the answers to child abuse and neglect brought on by substance use disorder are within reach. But just because we know better doesn't mean we'll do better unless there is a motivated public mobilized to demand change from elected leaders and policymakers.

According to MDHHS, an average of five people dies from opioid overdose every day – Michigan's drug overdose mortality rate ranked in the upper one-third in the nation.

Michigan had 2,053 opioid overdose deaths – from 2,686 overdose deaths involving any drugs – in 2017, the MDHHS reports.

The information gathered from these hearings — how children and families are being affected by the substance use epidemic and how social services, public health and other community supports can better address and prevent the ongoing epidemic — will lead to recommendations making sure that any plan is informed by the voices of citizens who can best define the solutions they need.

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