

Opinion | Children in Michigan are also victimized by opioid abuse

May 24, 2019

[Michele Corey](#) [Guest Commentary](#) [Opioids in Michigan](#)



Michele Corey is Vice President for Programs at Michigan's Children.

Tens of millions of Americans and tens of thousands of Michiganders 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, such as school failure, obesity and heart disease, and even substance use in their own lives.

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 percent increase](#) in children entering the foster care system due to their parent's drug misuse, with more than a third (36 percent) of all removals statewide, according to a [Child Trends publication](#). 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 \(February 2019\)](#).

Family recovery is far more likely to succeed with supportive relationships, stability, and concrete resources for times of need – one stressful event can trigger a relapse for parents, destabilizing their family and exposing children to trauma. These factors, which have been proven to prevent cases of child abuse and neglect more broadly, work by shielding families from situations of extreme stress.

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 a third is 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. Despite professionally accepted and known "paths of care," there are too few treatment options for families in home communities, lack of transitional or step-down housing for parents emerging from rehab (that would keep families intact), and not enough primary care physicians trained to help people with a disorder before it spirals.

The experts tell us the level of children's services don't measure up, either. Too many school social workers – where they do exist – are spread thin with tasks that detract from exclusively helping kids in crisis. School-based wrap-around services ideally reach kids where they are but are limited to select schools in Michigan. More drop-in centers for students struggling with a drug crisis at home, along with peer support programs, could help enormously.

CTF Executive Director Suzanne Greenberg opened the first hearing on a hopeful note, proclaiming that child abuse and neglect is 100 percent preventable. What we're learning from the CRPP 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 the MDHHS, an average of five people die from an opioid overdose every day, with Michigan's drug overdose mortality rate ranked in the upper third in the nation. Michigan had 2,053 opioid overdose deaths (and 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 the CRPP's recommendations to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services and the state Legislature. We're making sure that any plan that emerges to mitigate and prevent family instability from substance use is informed by the voices of citizens who can best define the solutions they need.

Please join us in this mission.