

Anti-drug leaders draw on experience

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/09/10/survey-finds-drug-use-mostly-holding-steady-except-for-marijuana-and-heroin/TZZQxL4uykC26S15DdYiTM/story.html?event=event25>

By Felice J. Freyer Globe Staff September 10, 2015

Tom Coderre was arrested for cocaine possession in Rhode Island. Michael Botticelli, driving drunk, once crashed into a disabled truck on a Massachusetts highway. Jonathan Goyer nearly died from a heroin overdose in Pawtucket, R.I. Paolo del Vecchio struggled with mental illness and drug use starting in childhood. Eduardo Vega attempted suicide.

These five men — now bearing such titles as “executive director,” “CEO,” and even “czar” — appeared at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on Thursday to announce new survey results on drug use and mental illness among Americans.

That meant that five of the six speakers at the event were people in long-term recovery from drug or mental health problems, and they brought their personal experience with the suffering, struggles, and triumphs behind the statistics. Their presence signals the growing leadership role of people in recovery, and their potential to affect public perceptions and public policy.

“I stand here today as one of the millions of Americans who are in recovery,” said Botticelli, the director of National Drug Control Policy, a position in which he is frequently referred to as the “drug czar.” “We are living proof that treatment works and recovery is possible.”

Kana Enomoto, acting administrator of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, noted that she was the only speaker lacking personal experience with addiction, adding that the data released Thursday were “not just numbers.”

The agency released the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which canvasses about 67,500 Americans every year.

The survey found that marijuana and heroin use among adults is increasing. Adolescents are using tobacco and alcohol less, but they are experiencing more depression.

It showed that suicidal thinking remains a pressing problem. In 2014, 3.9 percent of Americans 18 and older thought seriously about killing themselves during the previous 12 months, and 1.1 percent made suicide plans.

Botticelli, the former director of substance abuse services in Massachusetts, is the first national drug czar who has experienced a substance use disorder, in his case alcoholism.

“I often draw on my personal experience to help shape and guide policy,” he said in an interview.

Shame kept him from addressing his problems until a 1988 drunk-driving accident on the Massachusetts Turnpike led him into treatment. He said he sees his personal story “writ large” nationwide, with many people failing to get help until they’ve run into trouble with the law. That leads, he said, to discussions about improving early detection of substance use disorders while fighting stigma.

Botticelli was joined by two Rhode Islanders — Coderre, senior adviser to the mental health and substance abuse agency’s administrator; and Goyer, executive director of a Providence agency — who have become prominent in sharing their stories of addiction. Also speaking were: del Vecchio, director of the federal Center for Mental Health Services; and Vega, CEO and president of the Mental Health Association of San Francisco.

“People in recovery have always taken leadership positions,” Coderre, a former Rhode Island state senator, said in an interview. “Now, they’re taking them in agencies that have some type of responsibility for the public health response to addiction and recovery. And they’re being public about their own recovery status.”

Coderre recalled a recent meeting among co-workers, people with “intimidating” academic credentials. But when he spoke, he said, “You could hear a pin drop in the room, because they’re very interested in hearing from someone who has lived experience.”

Del Vecchio agreed that his personal history makes a difference. When he went to work at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in 1995, he was the first agency employee to openly acknowledge a lifetime of mental health and addiction issues.

His perspective led to such efforts as an awards program for television shows and films that thoughtfully depict mental health issues and work to reduce the use of seclusion and restraints on psychiatric patients.

Goyer, 28, was the youngest speaker. “Three years ago, I wasn’t even welcome at my mother’s house,” he told the gathering, “so it’s a miracle for me even to be here.”

Goyer’s father and brother died of overdoses. But when Goyer — who had started using drugs at age 12 — overdosed on heroin in 2013, someone saved his life by administering Narcan, the overdose antidote. In the hospital afterward, he realized, “If I get high again, I’m going to die. I had reached the end of the road.”

Within months, Goyer became the public face of recovery in Rhode Island — even appearing in huge public service advertisements on the sides of buses. Today, he manages a cafe and works as director of a charitable agency that reaches out to male sex workers in Providence.

“I’m going to do my best to help people,” Goyer said in an interview. “Everybody gets so caught up in numbers and trying to advocate for funding. . . . [But] everything’s right in front of us. It’s about community — connecting to community, unconditional love, and acceptance.”

That kind of love and acceptance, said Vega, the chief of the San Francisco mental health organization, is sorely needed by people who have contemplated or attempted suicide, a group that today may face a stronger stigma than addicts.

Vega, who suffered from anxiety, depression, and addiction, survived a suicide attempt, only to face humiliating treatment in the hospital — random searches, standing nearly naked for exams, restraints, and heavy tranquilizers, all the while being told he would probably never work and need constant care.

No wonder, he said, many people consider suicide the most dignified solution to their problems.

Vega said he believes his experience of recovery can help deter others from taking their own lives, and he called for a culture “in which it’s OK to talk about what you’re going through.”

Felice J. Freyer can be reached at felice.freyer@globe.com.