

# Court referrals for addicts increase as detox options are harder to come by

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There comes a time when alcoholics and addicts want help.



PHOTO/ Herald News Photo | Jack Foley

Steppingstone Incorporated is a residential and support services center for substance abuse in Fall River.

FALL RIVER — There comes a time when alcoholics and addicts want help.

Good luck finding it on your own, said Vic DiGravio, president of the Association for Behavioral Healthcare.

Court-ordered commitments to mental health facilities have spiked over the last decade — increasing by 41 percent between 2006 and 2012, according to state figures.

“What we have gathered was that one of the reasons court commitments have spiked is not just because of the increased use of addictive substances, but because people have difficulty finding treatment for that,” DiGravio said.

DiGravio was one of the speakers at the Commonwealth Conversations, a series of seminars around the state. The forums were organized by Sen. Michael Rodrigues. One of the questions addressed was why the state is seeing such growth in the use of illegal drugs, especially opiates such as heroin, oxycontin and hydrocodone.

The state has been doing a poor job of responding to it, DiGravio said.

“That has been a flaw in the system,” he said. “It has not been that difficult for someone to get into a detox program. That generally lasts for four or five days.

“But to get into a detox step-down bed is very difficult. There are four detox beds for every step-down bed in the state.

“Research shows that, if you have been using for a long time, you have chemical changes in your brain that make it difficult to quit. Four days won’t do it.”

Currently insurance companies can refuse to pay for step-down treatment without prior authorization — a step many people coming off of a drug bender are not able to make.

Because of that, family, friends and addicts themselves go to court, asking the state to commit them for treatment.

Chapter 123, Section 35, states a District Court judge can order a person into treatment if that person has lost the power of self control over the use of alcohol or other substances, if the use is threatening grave physical harm to the person “or substantially interferes with his social or economic functioning.”

In fiscal year 2006 there were 2,982 civil commitments in Massachusetts. That number rose steadily through six years, reaching 5,070 in 2012. Of those, 50 percent were for addiction to opiates, 39 percent for addiction to alcohol, according to the Bureau of Substance Abuse Services.

There is no sign the need is shrinking, figures show. The Department of Public Health reports that 3,511 people sought treatment in Fall River for substance abuse problems in the fiscal year that ended on June 30, 2014. That is compared to 3,130 a decade before.

The substances abused changed. In 2005, 36 percent sought help for problems with alcohol, 41 percent for heroin and 6 percent for other opioids. In 2014, 19 percent reported problems with alcohol, 63 percent for problems with heroin and 8 percent for other opioids.

In that time those seeking treatment for problems with cocaine or crack went from 9 percent to three percent.

There are changes on the horizon. A new state law will take effect in October, requiring insurance companies to pay for step-down care for people who have gone through a detox program.

And Fall River is one of five District Courts in the state with a special drug court, letting probation officers, police and health officials meet to work out sentences and rehabilitation programs for people charged with drug offenses who agree to go before the court.

The hope, officials say, will be to find a model the whole state can use to reduce the number of people going to jail or into court ordered hospital treatment.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

Court ordered civil commitments at Fall River District Court for substance abuse issues:2010: Alcohol, 41; Other drugs, 244.2011: Alcohol, 70; Other drugs, 218.2012: Alcohol, 94; Other drugs, 246.2013: Alcohol, 48; Other drugs, 292.2014: Alcohol, 57; Other drugs, 265.2015 (to date): Alcohol, 10; Other drugs, 58.Court ordered civil commitments in Massachusetts:2006: 2,9822007: 4,1082008: 3,6472009: 4,2552010: 4,5832011: 4,4972012: 5,0702013: 4,9822014: 5,288Total number of people seeking mental health treatment for substance abuse problems in Fall River according to the state Department of Public Health.2005: 3,130. Alcohol, 35.9 pc; Other opioids, 6.1 pc; Crack/cocaine, 9.3 pc; Heroin, 41.1 pc; Marijuana, 6.1 pc.2006: 3,674: Alcohol, 34.1 pc; Other Opioids, 6.1 pc; Crack/cocaine, 9.9 pc; Heroin, 42.5 pc; Marijuana, 4.8 pc.2007: 3,669; Alcohol, 36 pc; Other Opioids, 7.5 pc; Crack/cocaine, 9.9 pc; Heroin, 39.7 pc; Marijuana, 4.5 pc.2008: 3,660; Alcohol, 34.7 pc; Other Opioids, 8.3 pc; Crack/cocaine, 7.9 pc; Heroin, 43.2 pc; Marijuana, 3.7 pc.2009: 3,262; Alcohol, 28.9 pc; Other Opioids, 9.6 pc; Crack/cocaine, 6 pc; Heroin, 49.2 pc; Marijuana, 3.9 pc.2010: 3,345; Alcohol, 27.1 pc; Other Opioids, 12.8 pc; Crack/cocaine, 6.4 pc; Heroin, 47.7 pc; Marijuana, 3.9 pc.2011: 3,335; Alcohol, 30.5 pc; Other Opioids, 12.8 pc; Crack/cocaine, 4.9 pc; Heroin, 45.1 pc; Marijuana, 3.8 pc.2012: 3,598; Alcohol, 24.9 pc; Other Opioids, 14 pc; Crack/cocaine, 4.9 pc; Heroin, 50.8 pc; Marijuana, 2.5 pc.2013: 3,324; Alcohol, 22.7 pc; Other Opioids, 11.9 pc; Crack/cocaine, 4.9 pc; Heroin, 54.7 pc; Marijuana, 2.8 pc.2014: 3,511. Alcohol, 19.4 pc; Other opioids, 8.5 pc; Crack/cocaine, 3.4 pc; heroin, 63.2 pc; Marijuana, 3.5 pc.

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