Huntington Fire Chief Helps Change City?s Approach to Opioid Epidemic

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Huntington fire chief Jan Rader will be the keynote speaker for the Bridges Out of Addiction event, a free conference hosted by Ashland Community and Technical College. The conference is sponsored by the Healthy Choices, Health Communities or HCHC coalition, and the Tri-County Kentucky ASAP Board.

It is scheduled for March 14 at the Ashland Campus of ACTC. Jan Rader?s keynote address will focus on the importance of community collaboration in fixing the current drug epidemic that is affecting the nation. Rader was the first woman to lead a professional fire department in West Virginia, but this is not her only claim to fame. She rose to national prominence following the release of the documentary Heroin(e) on Netflix.

The short film focused on Huntington?s drug problem and certain people in the community who stepped up to try and make a difference. Rader?s efforts were prominently featured, and it led her to be named to the TIME 100 list, officially making her one of the world?s most influential people.

Rader joined the Huntington Fire Department in 1994 and became chief in 2017. And since November 2014, she has served as a member of the Mayor?s Office of Drug Control Policy. The task force is designed to

address drug addiction in the city as well as surrounding communities. The task force makes use of a holistic approach involving prevention, treatment, and law enforcement.

West Virginia has the country?s highest opioid overdose death rate. According to data published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, West Virginia had the highest rate of drug overdose deaths in the US in 2014, 2015, and 2016.

But thanks to Rader and the involvement of other individuals from the community, Cabell County overdoses are down by 40 percent. Huntington opened a clinic specializing in addiction treatment and also started a Quick Response Team whose members visit people who have recently overdosed.

?The team consists of a paramedic, a police officer, somebody in the recovery community, and somebody in the faith community,? said Rader. ?As a team, they go out and visit people who have overdosed within 72 hours of that resuscitation. They talk, they listen, they build a rapport with that patient, and they offer them treatment options.?

Rader has been a firefighter for 24 years and pursued her nursing degree a decade ago after realizing that an opioid epidemic was looming due to the rise of opioid use.

?I decided to increase my medical knowledge...because it became clear that the next big threat facing not only my city but other cities around the country was not the one-and-done disaster. The next big disaster in my city was and is the long, debilitating, and lethal disaster known as opioid addiction.?

As the opioid epidemic worsened, Rader realized that the traditional way of responding to overdoses wasn?t enough to create a lasting change. First responders can save lives in the short term by reversing opioid overdoses, but this does not treat addiction in the long term.

?[First responders] want to swoop in do our job and leave feeling satisfied that we've made a difference in somebody's life. But that just doesn't happen when we're dealing with somebody with substance use disorder," she said. ?We leave feeling frustrated and useless; we deal with the same people over and over again with no positive outcome. At some point, I realized that it is up to us as first responders to find better ways to deal with those that are suffering.?

Rader then assisted with the creation of new city-wide programs, including the Quick Response Team that was launched in 2017. This is as part of a push to better serve people suffering from substance use disorder.

In 2018, Huntington opened PROACT, which is a specialty clinic where individuals can be assessed by addiction specialists. ?It gives first responders a place to either take or refer our patients who are no longer in

life-threatening situations that have refused to go to the hospital.?

The city then started a self-care program for first responders. ?More and more, first responders are experiencing compassion fatigue and PTSD. It is not uncommon for the average firefighter in Huntington to deal with or see up to five young deaths per month. So this much-needed program will give them more mental health options that they desperately need. We now have yoga classes in fire stations. We've also provided on duty massages, which is fabulous.?

In addition to Rader, the conference at ACTC will feature presentations from Dr. Ginny Sprang and Van Ingram.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work. Click the link to see Cleveland's top rehab placement programs.

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