Police Chief Turned Treatment Center CEO Share Insights on How Crime, Substance Use Intersect

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Former Eugene, Ore., Police Chief Pete Kerns said his dad, Tom, was orphaned by alcoholism. That inspired Tom to become a doctor and co-found Serenity Lane, a nonprofit addiction treatment center based in Eugene. Now Pete is the chief of Serenity Lane, and in a recently released blog post titled "How Human Connection Guides Our Lives: An Interview with Serenity Lane CEO Pete Kerns", Pete said he?s determined to use his savvy about the connection between substance use and crime to make his community a better place.

Pete Kerns served the Eugene Police Department for 36 years, nine as chief, before taking the helm of Serenity Lane in 2019. He has implemented a long-term strategic plan to modernize the center?s operations and increase access to its services. The interview offers an interesting look at the brains behind Serenity Lane and the strategies Pete has implemented to bring the center up to speed with his vision.

When asked about the personal effect alcohol use disorder had on his father, Pete said, ?The reason why treating alcoholism was so important to our dad was because he watched his father die from alcoholism. When [my dad] grew up and went to medical school, he eventually started a practice in Eugene. He was interested in finding ways to treat alcoholism. The people like his dad were the people he wanted to treat. People who had families and homes and careers, and had an opportunity to contribute significantly to their family and to society.?

Pete is uniquely qualified to understand how mental health and substance use disorders can affect society. ?What you see in law enforcement is that drug and alcohol use is substantially responsible for society?s problems," he said. "Sheriffs and people who operate prisons will tell you that 80% or better of the people that are in prison or jail are in there because of mental health and substance use disorder conditions.?

Pete shared a story of the dangers of alcohol that he experienced in the line of duty. ?When I was a young

patrol officer, I responded to a fatal car accident where the driver was a husband and father with a job and responsibilities and good life ahead of him, a good life for his children ahead of them," he said. "He drove the wrong way over an overpass and killed an 18-year-old girl in high school who had a future ahead of her as well. It was a tragic loss for the girl?s family, and it was a tragic loss for the driver?s family as well. He had gone out drinking with his colleagues, had way too much to drink. He was probably suffering from alcoholism. That never needed to happen if the availability of drug and alcohol treatment were greater for someone like that.?

Pete also discussed the lack of government initiatives to deal with the problem of substance use. The necessary steps of public education and intervention are not conducted to the extent they should be in Oregon as there just isn?t enough funding. Pete said a robust government-funded mental health and substance use treatment program would do wonders for the community. He compared the situation in Oregon to that in other parts of the country. ?You?ll find that in other communities, particularly on the East Coast, that they provide more care for their communities. As a result, crime rates are lower, and treatment for conditions such as substance use disorder are more vibrant.?

Pete also talked about the generational impact of substance misuse and said he believes it destroys entire families and sets up the future generations for failure. ?When children grow up in an environment where they are exposed to alcoholism or substance use, and the problems that they bring, it can put them on a certain trajectory.? He said studies have shown that children who grow up in an environment where they are exposed to alcohol use disorder are up to four times as likely to develop alcohol use disorder themselves later in life.

He added that the stigma surrounding getting help can be a major barrier to seeking alcoholism treatment. The blog post also covers the efforts Serenity Lane has made to combat the opioid epidemic through its introduction of medication-assisted treatment.

Readers can call Serenity Lane at (541) 262-0802 to learn more about its individualized addiction treatment options.

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Serenity Lane Intensive Outpatient Services, Eugene

Serenity Lane was established as a private, non-profit addiction treatment center for alcoholism and drug use in 1973. We have programs throughout Oregon and Southwest Washington. We believe that recovery from addiction is possible.

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