

PERSPECTIVE

Today is:
December 12, 2021

Ms. Johnson

apple cow teacher

virus isolation fear

bullying drugs hope

you can help us

ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT RITTER/THE DAY

A call to unite

By CYNTHIA RITCHIE,
ELAINE MAYNARD-ADAMS
and MICHAEL PASSERO

COVID-19 HAS AFFECTED ALL OF OUR LIVES. Although our daily routines have been disrupted, it is almost incomprehensible to know that over one million children in the United States have lost a parent to COVID-19. The continued effects of this disease can be seen across our nation, state and here in New London.

In the fall of 2021, New London Public Schools (NLPS) welcomed our students back, and for some this was the first time in a classroom in almost two years. Coming into a structured environment has presented many challenges as both students and staff adjust to a new normal, a normal that for many is defined by the struggles and trauma they have been experiencing.

The reality is that many in our community are struggling with employment, housing, food, isolation, mental health, and a deep fear of contracting COVID-19 and possibly death. Our students have missed the opportunity to receive education in school buildings and many are adjusting as they come back from a screen-only education into classroom space.

In our community, New London has seen homeless families triple in numbers, reports of abuse and neglect increase, drug overdoses expand, and physical violence has escalated alarmingly. Our middle and high school-age children are dealing with physical and emotional growth while at the same time managing their classroom studies and the challenges

Although many challenges have been thrown at our entire community, many opportunities have also presented themselves.

that come along with social media inundation, misinformation and bullying.

To address the needs of our students and staff, NLPS has stepped up support through various social-emotional initiatives. NLPS is participating in formal curricular lessons, restorative circles, and individual and group counseling sessions (including outside referrals). NLPS has also tripled its efforts to do personal home visits to students' homes. The school district has added additional guidance counselors and social workers, wellness interventionists, and other mental health professionals who not only work with students who are struggling but provide support to the families as well.

NLPS continues to work closely with our city partners. The strong relationship with the New London Police Department and Chief Brian Wright has the shared goal of keeping our students and staff safe both inside and outside of our schools. Supported by Mayor Passero, the City Council and the Board of Education, Jeanne Millstein, director for human services, and Cynthia Ritchie, the superintendent of schools, continue to develop our Birth to Age 8 Community Resource Center, which is now open and functioning at the B.P. Learned building on Shaw

Street. The center provides services to address homelessness, IT literacy, food services, mental health, and is also home to additional preschool classrooms and educational, hands-on family events every three weeks.

As city and educational leaders in New London, we are working tirelessly to help our community members who are struggling. So, what else can be done?

Parents, take time to check in with your child regarding how they are adjusting to school and community. Monitor your child's social media accounts and know and understand with whom they are communicating and for what purpose. Know where your children are. Connect with your child's school, teachers, and the school district as a whole. Ask questions. Visit your school. Attend parent-teacher conferences and schedule a follow-up if needed. Join in the district and school-sponsored engagement events. Check your child's backpack regularly. Know your child's academic and social-emotional levels and learn about the various resources and services available around the clock. Counseling services are available at any time and for no cost to a family.

Use the Anonymous Alerts function in the NLPS app to report any concerns. Know that NLPS has a highly-trained CORE Safety team, which responds to needs or concerns around the clock. If you read something on social media about the school that concerns you, call the principal, superintendent and/or a Board member. If a school needs to go into a safety lockdown, families will always be notified via

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A different kind of essential worker



LISA MCGINLEY

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Members of New London's Opioid Action Team are a different kind of essential workers than the medical personnel and grocery store clerks and others whom we have thanked, inadequately but repeatedly, through the pandemic.

To be a humane, insightful, empathetic source of support for people with substance abuse disorder is to serve in a pandemic that began light years before COVID-19 and will never be completely cured. People afflicted with drug abuse disorder are used to being dismissed and dumped on. The OAT, a joint effort by many public and

non-profit partners, acts on the belief that there is no such concept as a throwaway person, but after a year in which 100,000 Americans died from overdoses — 1,300 in Connecticut in a comparable time frame — it's hard to argue that does not happen.

In New London, they will continue to try.

The godmother of the nearly 5-year-old effort is softspoken Jeanne Milstein, director of the city's Human Services Department. She is a former state Child Advocate and currently guides the structuring of a Birth-to-8 developmental program for New London children with American Rescue Plan funds. She is that rare person who sees both the forest and the trees. She acknowledges the timelessness of the forest without conceding the significance of a single tree.

The field marshal is Kelly Thompson, CEO of the Alliance for Living. She is fierce — and she battles for dispelling the stigma of addiction and for recognition that it is an

The Opioid Action Team acts on the belief that there is no such concept as a throwaway person.

affliction of a brain altered by opioid use and not just some sort of bad seed. It takes a certain steeliness to keep reminding the fortunate not to judge while assuring people whose self-esteem has taken many hits that her team wants to know not what's the matter with them but what matters to them. Her troops include peer navigators with substance abuse experience; her allies, EMTs, paramedics, police.

As the regional resource for HIV/AIDS, the Alliance is expert at strategies involving safe syringes for heroin users and cooperation with law enforcement to steer users to help, not jail. The development of drugs that could change the AIDS

diagnosis from terminal to chronic gave the agency a focus on long-term services. The Alliance's strengths match the needs of the OAT.

Jennifer Muggeo, deputy director of the Ledge Light Health District, is referred to as the project manager for the Opioid Action Team but her passion is saving lives and her frustration is that solutions proven to work in other countries can't get a foothold here.

"We would not respond to any other public health crisis the way we respond to this," she told me. "We have an evidence base of policies that could save lives."

People are at the greatest risk of overdose when they are socially isolated, using drugs alone. Muggeo points out that Canada and some European nations have overdose prevention centers where users can consume drugs with medical personnel present. People there do not die.

The task these three and their partners have committed to is to stay available for the long haul with each

individual while fighting for better public policy. Success is hard to quantify with the usual sort of statistical comparisons of how many their efforts might have saved this year vs. last; often someone from the team will have an initial conversation, then months of silence, and then a call; "I'm ready." Having convinced users and loved ones to keep the antidote naloxone on hand, they may not hear about it when an overdose is halted.

The challenges will keep on coming in new forms — another Covid variant that might mean reopening safe isolation centers; a terrifying degree of adulteration in drugs that can kill someone who doesn't even know they are ingesting it. Fentanyl is the additive most people have heard of; now it's xylazine, which is not treatable with naloxone and hard to test quickly. The team and its leaders are essential workers, all right. They have earned our thanks.

Lisa McGinley is a member of The Day Editorial Board.