

A Community Working Together:

2018 Polk County Opioid and Substance Misuse Forum

by Joshua Kennedy

The opioid epidemic is increasingly becoming part of our everyday conversation. It has most likely touched your life or the life of someone you know. Its consequences are real and tragic, costly in lives, relationships, health, and well-being to individuals, families, and communities. Many times, we like to think that issues like the ones surrounding the opioid epidemic are reserved for large, urban areas and aren't really a part of the conversation of our protected, rural communities, but the impacts of the opioid crisis have unfortunately created an environment where more communities are looking for a way to fight back.

In October of 2017, Polk County community members and agencies gathered for a discussion around the Opioid Epidemic facing our nation and Western North Carolina. The forum was sponsored by Polk County, the County Commissioners, St. Luke's Hospital, Tryon Estates, Polk Fit Fresh and Friendly, and the Columbus Fire Department. During the meeting the community members were presented information on addiction and trends as well as the impact on the community, with a focus on the education, employment, and health sectors. Opioids have been proven to be highly addictive because they react with opioid receptors in the brain and nerve endings to prevent pain; however, they also can produce pleasurable effects on the brain. With continued use, the brain and body crave higher doses of the medication to produce the same pleasurable, euphoric effect. This continued use can lead to larger doses or alternative lethal combinations. As a result, chronic use can actually change the brain's chemistry, which is why it can be so complicated to battle this type of addiction.

Therefore, one of the objectives of the 2017 Polk County Opioid and Substance Misuse Forum was to gather community input on how Polk County can begin to combat this problem. How do we address addiction and support our neighbors and family members as they cope with this chronic illness? What we knew going into the forum was that this was not going to be solved overnight or with one meeting, but rather by working as a team over several months and perhaps years to bridge gaps in services and increase our understanding of addiction. As the next step in our local process, we are hosting a second round of community discussions on Tuesday, March 20th at 5PM. At this 2018 Polk County Opioid and Substance Misuse Forum, community members and groups will work together to develop strategies for addressing addiction and creating community awareness.

Following this second forum, community groups such as Polk Fit Fresh and Friendly (PF3) and its Polk Substance Abuse Coalition workgroup, Polk County Consolidated Human Services Agency, the United Methodist Church-Blue Ridge District, Columbus United Methodist Church, Tryon Congregational Church, Foothills Health Network, and others will help to support these ideas and work to make them a reality. These groups will not be acting alone, but rather working with community businesses, non-profit groups, civic groups and individual community members to

achieve their objectives. Please consider participating in the forum and one of the partnering community groups as we work together to address addiction and substance misuse in our community. To register, please contact Joshua Kennedy at jkennedy@polknc.org.

Joshua Kennedy is Director of Polk County's Consolidated Human Services Agency. He also serves on the Board of PF3, a group of 120+ community members, leaders and health professionals working together to plan and implement effective strategies to promote wellness in our community. We welcome any individual who is interested in joining us to make our community a healthier place for all. For more information and a list of our 2018 meeting dates, please visit our website at www.polkfitfreshandfriendly.org.