

Kathy B. O'Keefe

I am from the North Texas, Denton County area. Texas is rated 50th (of 50 states) in funding for Substance Use and Mental Health. We encourage those with Substance Use Disorder to get clean, yet we do not have enough facilities or money to back that up.

Denton County jail is the largest mental health facility in Denton County. Yet, we lock up people for substance use/mental health and then provide them with no services. They can play video games but there is not a 12 step or ministry that comes into the jail to begin helping the population. Drug courts have been a great help for this population, but while incarcerated, why not start providing them some services to help with the reason they are there in the first place. They need encouragement, a plan for change and someone to believe in them. Then, we will see change and stop the revolving door.

We know that people use drugs for several reasons. First and foremost are mental health issues. Whether it is anxiety, depression, ADHD/ADD or other illnesses, users just want to feel normal. Second is trauma. We have a lot of trauma in families, which could be anything from a grandparent dying to sexual assault. Third is genetics. My brother was an alcoholic who has 4 children. All have struggled with addiction.

Below are some items that I feel need to be addressed so that we can effectively take control of the opioid crisis that we as a nation are currently in.

Judgment and Stigma is still a huge problem across the nation. Many people will not come forward because of the judgement that they feel. I was recently with a group of families that go to a "Compassionate Friends" grief group. This support group is for anyone that has lost a loved one. When people find out that they lost someone to a drug overdose, the families said they no longer feel comfortable. Because of that, WTF - Winning The Fight has opened a group called "Missing Pieces" to substance use. It is imperative that we continue to educate people about this disease and that it does not discriminate.

Support for the families that are raising the children of addicts. We need to have programs for these children to understand why their parents are absent. They need this education to understand they are genetically predisposed to this disease and that they are not to blame for their parent's choices. We can change the course of their future through education and support. We also need to acknowledge and support those families that step up to raise these children.

Prescribing is a huge problem. We cannot continue to allow hospitals to determine the quality of their care by patients that are not in pain. I have young women in recovery having babies and they are pushed to take hydrocodone. First, they had a baby, not heart surgery, so there is no real need for medications (in most cases). Second, they are encouraged to take opioids, yet they are breastfeeding. We must stop this practice. Doctors have even told me that they are forced to provide pain relief, or they will be fired for poor performance. This is just wrong.

MAT – Medical Assisted Treatment is just now being looked at as a possible treatment. However, most treatment facilities promote abstinence. With more conversation regarding MAT, we are giving more people a chance for stable recovery. However, typically MAT facilities are few and far between and each one seems to only carry one method, mostly suboxone. Methadone clinics still tend to create a very stigmatizing experience by going daily, standing in lines, paying with cash. The clients are just trying to

stay alive and have a meaningful life without drugs, and Vivitrol injections are about \$1,500.00 per month. That is not a treatment that many can afford. Especially after they have been in treatment a few times.

Narcan – Naloxone The Surgeon General just came out and encouraged everyone to carry Naloxone / Narcan. I am trying to put together a training for Narcan in our local area. There are only two guys from TONI (Texas Overdose Naloxone Initiative) who do the training who have a grant that allows them to give out a free box of Narcan with the course. They are too busy to be everywhere in Texas. I found someone from the University of North TX that can train but is not able to provide the Narcan. I must find a sponsor that will cover the \$5,000.00 cost for Narcan for the participants. If we do not give it at training, no one will go purchase it for \$118.00. They will call 911 and wait for first responders. This costs lives. When a person overdoses, they are typically found. You don't know how long they have been down, and the person finding them is the *first responder*. Big Pharma, insurance companies and other corporations need to be encouraged to provide these types of sponsorships / grants.

Veterans have the right to be treatment for PTSD and the mental health issues that they get from serving as the protectors of our country. They must be able to go to any counselor or mental health facility for treatment. There are many great treatment methods that are very successful for PTSD, such as EMDR, ETT, and a few others. Let's get them the treatment that they deserve. When we lose 22 Veterans per day to suicide, we don't have time to wait on treatment.

Medical Staff, especially hospitals that treat overdoses, should be **required to get continued education** on addiction. I have been to quite a few hospitals for overdose calls. I see doctors that blame parents for the kids using drugs and staff treating them like "junkies". I have had to hold vomit bags and help patients to the bathroom when suffering from diarrhea because staff did not care about their needs. They were just drug addicts. When our son Brett overdosed the first time, one of the ER nurses came out and said that she could not work his case because she works to save people that want to live, not those that chose drugs. Addiction is a disease ... NOT a moral failure. We MUST educate to change this stigma.

Thank you for addressing this very important issue. We all must work together in order to tackle this multifaceted problem. Please know that I am here to do what ever is necessary to help with this issue. Please just ask.

Kathy