

## Into Action Recovery works to combat opioid crisis in Tewksbury

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TEWKSBURY — Sisters Mary-Ellen Cooper and Patty-Jo Hanley were fed up.

“I would like to open a sober house in Tewksbury to help young adults from our community battling opiate addiction,” Cooper wrote on Facebook in February 2015. “Does anyone have \$400,000? Need to start fundraising. It will take a village. Anyone up for the challenge?”

In the year-and-a-half since she posted her call for action, a village has come together to turn Cooper and Hanley’s dream into a reality. Several of their family members as well as other area residents have joined her to form Into Action Recovery (IAR), a 12-step program centered around rehabilitation.

The members of IAR are more than concerned citizens — they’re activists determined to save their community from an epidemic.

None of the members have the privilege to think of opiate addiction as an abstract concept, something that people in far away cities deal with, but not them.

Some have battled addiction themselves. Others have watched their family members struggle to get clean and lost loved ones to the disease.

“We’re tired of going to wakes and funerals for young kids,” said IAR member Bonnie Merrick, who lives in Methuen.

Like so many other towns across the state, opioid usage in Tewksbury is on the rise.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health reported that between 2012 and 2013, there were three deaths caused by opium overdoses in Tewksbury. In 2014 and 2015, that number had risen to 15.

On June 21, The Tewksbury Police Department reported to the Board of Selectmen that there had been seven opioid deaths in the first six months of this year.

“If anyone ever told me I’d be sitting here talking about this,” said Cooper. “I’d be surprised.”

Cooper first heard about heroin in Massachusetts during a rotation at a hospital in Lowell in 1989. She could hardly believe the drug had made its way to her corner of the world. At the time, it was better known as the poison of choice for musicians like Jim Morrison and Ray Charles, a dark cloud over places like New York City and Los Angeles.

By the early 2000s, the drug had snaked its way to Boston, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives along the way.

“Unfortunately, this has touched so many people,” said member Scott Consaul. “It’s in every town and every community in the Commonwealth.”

Enough was enough.

The first IAR meeting took place four days after Cooper made her post. A dozen people gathered at the Dunkin’ Donuts on Main St. in Tewksbury, a fact that makes some of the members smirk when they think about how far the group has come.

At that initial meeting, there was less to smile about. The inaugural members agreed that there weren’t enough quality resources for people battling opioid addictions.

Their mission became clear. Tired of the “revolving door of detox, rehab, home and relapse,” IAC’s put out a mission statement saying their goal is “to provide a long term educational, therapeutic and spiritual 12-step program for adults with opiate and/or alcohol addiction.”

It’s a badly needed resource. Members who had navigated the recovery process lamented the strict rules regarding entry for detox and treatment clinics, lax rules at sober houses and a lack of beds meant many addicts were falling through the cracks.

One member said she had heard of parents feeding their addicted children heroin to get them into detox clinics, which sometimes have minimum requirements for how much a person must be using to be admitted.

Other facilities require entrants to be clean before starting the program. Many addicts without the right insurance are turned away simply because they cannot pay.

“If you’re not affected by it,” said member Kelley Giasullo. “You don’t understand. Jail is the only place you can get a free, guaranteed detox.”

What Cooper, Hanley and other IAR members had in mind was a place for addicts to get a second chance. Modeled after the 12-step program made famous by Alcoholics Anonymous, the group’s recovery house will be focused on helping addicts recuperate and reintegrate into society.

IAC is particularly clear that they are not a typical sober house.

“[Sober houses] don’t have people to monitor the comings and goings,” said Cooper. One member added that many of those facilities are functionally “flop houses” with drugs surrounding those trying to stave off relapse.

At the proposed IAC house, there will be round-the-clock staff to ensure those in recovery are following the rules.

Consaul added that with this method, those in treatment would never get to the point of using again inside the house — there would be consequences for bad behavior long before that happened.

At the core of IAC is a human approach to recovery, one based in compassion and understanding rather than money grabbing and bed turnover rate.

While many rehabilitation facilities have limits for how long a person can stay and lack the space for clients, the newly founded group plans to prioritize recovery over quick turnaround as a long term treatment center.

“This will be on a case by case basis,” added Cooper. “Some people take longer than others.”

Similarly, while many recovery houses are privatized and prohibitively expensive, IAC is a nonprofit. Their plan is keep costs low so that all addicts, regardless of income, have a chance at recovery.

A bank representative told Hanley about a developer who had applied for a mortgage with a similar purpose. The developer had bought land and intended to build sober houses on it, but he wasn't going to be directly involved in the construction, management or programming for the facilities.

Hanley said, "She told me, 'You guys are a recovery program.'"

From humble beginnings, on August 1 the group officially secured \$200,000 in funds through Rep. James Miceli and the Massachusetts legislature to begin the process of acquiring a house.

"The fact is, there aren't many people in the Commonwealth who can say they don't know someone effected by the opiate crisis," said Miceli in a press release. "I'm glad our legislature came together in agreement that we should be doing more, not less to combat this epidemic."

Still, much of the work is yet to be done. The group is currently in the process of sifting through real estate listings trying to find a suitable place for their project.

"It's not just for Tewksbury," said Merrick. "This can be built anywhere in the Merrimack Valley."

While progress toward getting a house marches forward slowly but surely, IAC members are busy spreading the word about their GoFundMe page, [www.gofundme.com/](http://www.gofundme.com/)

intoactionrecovery, which has already raised over \$5,000. The group is also planning a 5K scheduled for September 18 at Tewksbury Memorial High School.

The group meets twice a month at Tewksbury Hospital and residents are encouraged to join the fight against opioid addiction — with a small warning. Even first timers to the meetings end up joining the cause and contributing their talents.

"When you come to our meetings," said Cooper. "You leave with a job."

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