

South End Forum Working Group discusses the local opioid crisis

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The South End Forum Working Group on Addiction, Recovery and Homelessness met last week for a presentation and question and answer session regarding the opioid epidemic in the Boston area, specifically its impact on South End neighborhoods.

South End residents were able to speak directly to a panel of experts including government officials, health care providers, addiction specialists and law enforcement. The discussion was moderated by Steve Fox, one of the original founders of the South End Forum. Fox and the 18-person panel addressed the fears, anger, concerns and confusion of a community that has found itself at the unintended epicenter of a national crisis.

The South End forum is the umbrella organization for many neighborhood-specific groups in the community. The Working Group on Addiction, Recovery and Homelessness met for the first time last year, when Fox and other members noticed a visible change in their neighborhoods. “We all certainly understood the addiction crisis,” said Fox, “but the South End was beginning to see a dramatic increase in the amount of on-street addiction-related activity.”

The South End hosts two methadone clinics that distribute the medication to recovering individuals each day. The area is also home to Rosie’s Place, Pine Street Inn, Boston Health Care for the Homeless, Woods-Mullen Shelter, Southampton Street Shelter and other facilities with resources for people who need addiction-related care or emergency medical attention. Residents who live near these facilities have therefore become directly involved in interactions between drug-addicted individuals and the professionals who manage and treat them.

The residents who spoke up at the forum said they often find people who have overdosed near their homes. They constantly find needles littered on their front stoops, in gutters and in flower pots. Many said they only have to look outside their bedroom windows to see somebody sleeping, living or using. Because of the density of the addicted population in South End neighborhoods, residents can become responsible for intervening just by walking out their front doors. For some, the responsibility feels unfair and unacceptable. “I’m just a resident,” one said. “Why do we have to be part of the cure?” It leaves others feeling overwhelmed, helpless and scared.

It was stressed over the course of the meeting that the opioid addiction crisis is extremely multi-dimensional, hence the range of disciplines, education and backgrounds on stage. The challenge of the evening was balancing the hyper-local, immediate concerns of South End residents against a larger-than-life epidemic with no simple solution.

For example, one of the most-discussed topics was needles. One resident questioned the legitimacy of handing out clean needle kits and whether it was simply enabling more drug use or attracting more affected people.

According to Michael Botticelli, panel member and executive director of the Grayken Center for Addiction at Boston Medical Center, the answer is no: giving out clean needles does not increase drug use.

“And one of the ways that we’ve been able to diminish the chances that those needles are infected with HIV is handing out those kits,” he said. “So not only does it protect people who are injecting, but it protects the police and it protects you if you happen to get stuck.”

“Well we don’t want to be stuck by needles,” a resident called out.

“Our solution has to be multi-faceted,” Botticelli responded. “It has to focus on how to get people the right care when they need it, and in the meantime, keep people alive. Keep people from getting HIV and hepatitis, and keep people from getting stuck by needles. As well as being conscious of the community implications of this. And it’s hard. It’s hard to do all those things at the same time. But we’ve got to continue to do it.”

The meeting also touched on adding more safe needle deposit locations; increasing 311 services to not only help drug-addicted people in distress but to collect data and learn patterns; the creation of a comprehensive, campus-style treatment center to alleviate the demand on current shelters and hospitals; and calling on other cities and towns to pull their weight in treatment options so that addicted people do not continue to flood into Boston and overwhelm the city’s resources.

Despite the clear challenges, Fox said he was hopeful for the future of these meetings. While he did not claim or expect to be able to “solve” the issues, he said that with education, small steps and a relationship between residents and the professionals in the panel, they can all at least work together to reduce harm.

The next Working Group meeting is not yet scheduled, but all information can be found on the South End Forum Facebook page.