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Addressing the Opioid Epidemic: North Andover Police Department

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DEPARTMENT

Addressing the Opioid Epidemic: North Andover Police Department
James Buckley
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Introduction

To fulfill the capstone requirement for the Merrimack College Honors Program, I approached a contact at the North Andover Police Department who set up a meeting for me to discuss potential areas of study with the Chief. As a dual major studying criminology and accounting, I pursued the opportunity to combine both disciplines into one project. The initial meeting with the Chief of Police occurred on September 19, 2016, where he agreed to support my project. Objectives that were established included addressing the budgetary impact of: the opioid epidemic, dealing with a ten percent loss of the department's budget for winter services, and the consequences of four officers retiring. The goals of the project were set, but I also emphasized that I would focus on the department benefitting from the research completed.

The Chief provided documents regarding the department's budgets for the prior two years for analysis. Through the course of the project and the research process, the area of study began to concentrate mainly on dealing with the opioid epidemic in the town. It became apparent that the potential loss of funding due to winter services and the retirement of the officers were not as pressing issues to the department. After thorough research on the opioid epidemic and gathering details on the matter within North Andover, it became clear that the issue was progressing and needed to be addressed. The severity of the opioid epidemic resulted in it becoming the main focus of the project.

Throughout the research process, from planning the capstone to its completion, I was guided by Accounting Professor Donald Levis as my project mentor. With considerable professional business experience, he was able to advise me on my

approach, organization, and management of the project, as well as information about how to efficiently manage the project. Meetings with the professor were held biweekly and focused on the progress of the research and the direction of the project. I also maintained a log of my research activities and hours spent.

While one of the initial objectives of the capstone project was finding room in the police department's budget to fund the opioid epidemic, the severity of the problem proved more significant than I originally anticipated. The increase in opioid abuse in the state, as well as the growing presence of the issue in North Andover, was inspiration to focus solely on this one objective.

The Extent of the Problem

The narcotics involved in the opioid epidemic, mainly heroin, have been a problem in communities across the United States for decades. Heroin has been the most significant contributor to the recent progression of the opioid epidemic, partly due to the street cost of the drug decreasing (Mitchell, 2016). The usage of heroin has greatly increased, as well as the number of overdoses due to the potency of the drugs on the street. The extent of the problem is evidenced by Massachusetts declaring a Public Health Emergency in 2014 regarding the epidemic ("A Comprehensive Strategy to End Opioid Abuse in Massachusetts", n.d). Despite the government recognizing the issue, policies are yet to slow the progression.

Heroin has consistently been a high cause of death rate for many years in the United States, but has recently started to increase considerably. As Kevin Cullen's Boston Globe article (December 2016) points out, gun related homicides outnumbered heroin deaths 5 to 1 in 2007; 2015 was the first time heroin deaths

outnumbered gun homicides. The eye-opening statistic means, “Across America now, a needle in the hand of an addict is more lethal than a gun in the hand of a criminal” (Cullen, 2016). The opioid epidemic is a national issue that continues to grow and take the lives of citizens at an alarming rate.

Reasons for the Increase in Opioids

There are several contributing factors that have led to the rise of the opioid epidemic. Perhaps the most significant element of the problem is the startlingly low cost of heroin on the streets. People who were previously addicted to drugs can now afford to buy more frequently and in larger quantities.

Perhaps the most concerning aspect of the problem has been individuals becoming addicted to heroin who previously had no drug seeking behavior. Professionals are speculating that one major cause of the spike in abuse has been inappropriate treatment of opioid pain medicine by doctors. While healing from painful injuries, patients are subscribed strong painkillers to make the discomfort more manageable. By the time the injury is healed, some patients become reliant on the opioid medicine, despite no longer needing it for treatment. When these patients are abruptly taken off the prescriptions, they feel a continued need for the medicine due to the dependence that was developed. While this is not the case for all individuals who are prescribed opiates, there are a considerable number of instances that do occur. Dependence on the opiate painkillers has led individuals to seek the drugs from non-legitimate sources. Due to the extremely high street price of painkiller drugs, up to a dollar per milligram according to one law enforcement professional, desperate people turn to the vastly cheaper alternative of heroin

(Martin, Lindsay, & Laderman, 2016). A CNN article by Dr. Sanjay Gupta (2016), states that a sixty-milligram pill of oxycontin costs roughly \$60, while a comparable dose of heroin costs only one-tenth that. The healthcare contribution to addiction is highly controversial, as some people would like to see the prescription of opiates strictly reduced, while others argue that the strong medicine is necessary for patients in severe pain.

Prescription Regulation

Dr. Christopher Fischer, the Site Chief of Cambridge Health Alliance's Somerville and Cambridge campuses, was interviewed about his medical perspective of the epidemic. Dr. Fischer has encountered a significant number of cases involving heroin and overdoses. He stressed the disturbing spike in overdose deaths in recent years, emphasizing the extent of the problem in general. While acknowledging prescriptions as a contributing factor, the physician explained the difficulty in adjusting the process. Dr. Fischer discussed how there are patients who suffer traumatic injuries and are in enough pain to legitimately need opiate-based treatment. While some law enforcement personnel suggested that such patients be gradually weaned off the prescription to avoid addiction, Dr. Fischer argued that it is not a solution (personal communication, October 28, 2016). If an individual is already at a point that he or she is experiencing reliance on the drug, then supplying more, even at a reduced amount, will be enhancing the dependence.

While it is a controversial issue, there have already been steps taken in order to regulate the healthcare industry's prescription practices. In March 2016, Governor Baker signed legislation that aims to strictly enforce the prescriptions of

opiate medicine. Specifically, the law enacted a seven-day limit on first time supply, with a very limited number of exceptions (“Mass Opioid Legislation Practice Guide”, 2016). Setting a limit on supply should help mitigate the development of dependence, as dependence typically takes place through a long-term prescription. In addition, the new regulations require the documentation of patient prescriptions (“Mass Opioid Legislation Practice Guide”, 2016). By documenting patient referrals, physicians will have more success keeping track of drug-seeking behavior and will be able to apply more caution with writing prescriptions.

Opioid pain medicine has been prescribed for years, but the extent that it has contributed to dependence on drugs has only occurred in recent years. The increase could be attributed to larger doses of drugs being prescribed, which the new legislation hopes to curb. The success of Governor Baker’s regulations will not be measurable for some time, but the state hopes to see a decrease in overdoses going forward.

Overdose Increase

In addition to the rise in the number of heroin users, the amount of overdoses has skyrocketed. Beyond the fact that more people are abusing heroin, the rise of users overdosing is exponential. Unfortunately, the potency of heroin on the street has been greatly increasing, as it is being mixed with other narcotics. Incredibly strong medicine like fentanyl, which can be fatal in small amounts, is being combined into heroin with the intention of purposely causing overdoses. Massachusetts saw 1,379 overdoses in 2015, 50% of which had fentanyl as a factor (Fay & Martinez, 2016). Fentanyl appears to be an increasing factor in the spike of

overdoses both in Massachusetts and nationwide. According to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, the number of overdoses in the state increased by 63% from 2012 to 2014. 2015 saw overdoses triple nationwide since 2010 (2016). According to Dr. Fischer and law enforcement personnel, drug dealers experience an increase in demand when an individual overdoses from their product because it implies a particularly strong drug. While this is an illogical approach for mental well being, it is evidence of the instability of drug addicts.

It is difficult to address the issue of dealers lacing their drugs and may prove to be a progressing issue. A drug called carfentanil, which is roughly one hundred times more potent than fentanyl, is now appearing in drugs sold on the streets. According to an article from the Huffington Post, “the drug is so powerful, a tiny 20-microgram dose — about the size of a grain of salt — can be fatal” (Lambert, 2016). Overdoses are becoming an increasing issue because users are already injecting a dangerous amount of substances through heroin, without knowing that the dose is mixed with another drug one hundred times stronger; the extent of which is evident in Figure 1 below (Bond, 2016).



Figure 1: Fatal doses of heroin and fentanyl.

Those abusing heroin are in a fractured state of mind, where they are abandoning their own mental well being, and are repeatedly putting themselves in life threatening situations. The release of stronger drugs than what is already causing mass overdoses, which will inevitably be sold on the streets, may likely cause the epidemic to get much worse.

Treating Overdoses

Nalaxone, also known as Narcan, is a treatment that curbs an overdose and is increasingly used by police departments statewide. North Andover police officers recently underwent training in the administration of Narcan and are all equipped with this life saving tool. While it is undoubtedly a great advancement, as it continues to help people escape death and gives them another chance to fight their addiction, it does not solve the underlying problem. The North Andover police department has observed that the same offenders are being continually treated for the majority of overdose cases in the town. One individual in particular was brought in on forty-five separate occasions, for both drug and non-drug related charges, until he ultimately died of an overdose. Addicts coming within moments of losing their lives and not changing their behavior is evidence that Narcan is not a long-term solution to the opioid epidemic; rather a means of limiting the number of victims. Dr. Fischer and law enforcement personnel that were interviewed all agreed that more needs to be done to heal addiction at its core, citing treatment as the best course of action.

Consequences of Addiction

When there are individuals going through addiction, their whole community suffers the consequences. Beyond the personal fallout of the addicts, like alienating family members and experiencing traumatic health issues, the desperation of needing to get high affects other citizens. Addiction causes a person to make drugs the top priority in his or her life, even at the expense of a career and owning a house. Belongings end up being sold and relationships tarnished while chasing the next high, as it consumes an addict's life. The desperation for scoring drugs and finding money to pay for them wreaks consequences on a community. In addition to the presence of drugs in the town, citizens may experience non-drug related crimes, like larceny, that occur as a repercussion from drug seeking behavior. While the first inclination people may have toward dealing with drug addicts is avoiding them, it may be worth their while to see that their community is free of addiction. By helping treat the heroin epidemic and those suffering from it, crime could be greatly reduced. Beyond simply helping a person in need, devoting resources toward curbing drug use is beneficial for the town as a whole.

Drug Use in North Andover

The opioid epidemic is not just a problem that affects major cities, as there is a growing market for heroin in suburban communities. North Andover saw a spike from only seven overdoses in 2015, to twenty-three possible overdoses in just the first nine and a half months of 2016, depicting evidence of how grave the problem really has become in the community. The epidemic is not an issue that can be delayed and gradually deliberated, as immediate action is required to treat individuals affected and heal the community as a whole. The heroin problem has

reached North Andover and the number of citizens whose lives are affected is growing significantly. Law enforcement personnel seem passionate about helping to heal the town and eager to address the issue, upon the development of effective approaches.

Proposed Policies in the United States

The increase in heroin use came about very quickly, with the rise in potency occurring even faster. As it is becoming a nationwide issue, new approaches are being tested, but are too recent for effects to be empirically measured. Despite being experimental, enacting new policies may prove beneficial. The most common treatments that major communities are testing include: utilizing recovery coaches, educating communities on the danger of not following prescription guidelines, and enforcing stricter policing on drug prevalent areas of town (Arditi, 2016).

Utilizing recovery coaches is an approach to support addicts from the sympathetic standpoint of a mentor who has experienced the recovery process. The hope is that the coach is more capable of getting through to an addict on a personal level. Finding participants who have gone through the recovery process, and are willing to help others do the same, may prove difficult but has the potential to greatly contribute to treatment practices.

With the rise of opiate dependence resulting from prescriptions, many communities are reaching out to both physicians and citizens in hopes of emphasizing the danger of inappropriately taking medicine. The percentage of people who developed heroin dependence through prescription medicine is difficult to accurately measure, but one source reports a figure as high as 75% of heroin

users (Martin, Lindsay, & Laderman, 2016). Establishing a program to educate the community on the importance of following prescription guidelines could help minimize the number of non-drug seeking individuals from developing dependence. With a significant number of such cases occurring, the extent of the opioid epidemic could be greatly mitigated, if the program was effective enough. A potential problem with this technique, is that most people do not accept that such a situation could ever happen to them, which makes them less likely to take the program seriously.

Police officers have a unique perspective on the opioid epidemic, as their jobs require trying to thwart drug trafficking as well as assisting medical related drug emergencies, like overdoses. Having officers be equipped with Narcan greatly helps the medical response aspect of their duties, but they could also try to take new tactics toward confiscating drugs. The Safe Streets Program is one approach that is being tested out in Providence, Rhode Island, where officers prioritize the most serious offenders, while seeking treatment for those with substance abuse (Mitchell, 2016). This policing technique may prove effective for tracking drug dealers, while helping drug users enter treatment. Officers would be able to devote more time toward limiting the presence of drugs in the community, while also helping individuals already addicted. The most difficult aspect of this approach is determining an efficient method of getting individuals to enter a treatment program, as addicts would likely resist the assertion that they need help.

Developing New Strategies

The new legislation that Governor Baker signed will hopefully make a significant impact on the opioid epidemic, but North Andover can take action to

further treat the issue. In addition to helping enforce the new regulations and educating the community on taking precaution with prescriptions, officers have the potential to address the issue directly.

Data from the police department's database shows the location of overdoses to which officers have responded. After responding to a call, an officer files a report about the incident, including whether heroin use was suspected and the location of the case. The department constructed a map, as seen in Figure 2 below, of the overdoses in 2016, up until the 16th of October, which indicates that the majority of cases occurred within a relatively small radius of each other.

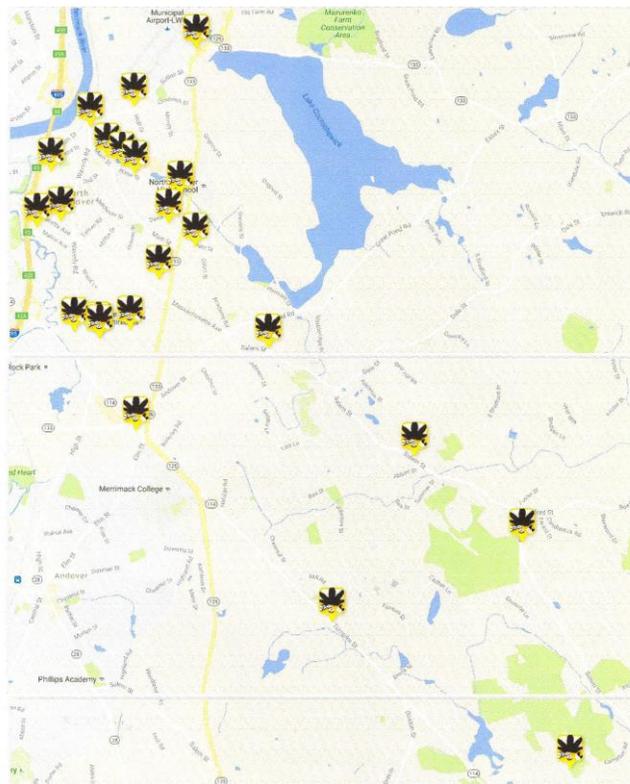


Figure 2: Map of Possible Overdoses

The clustering of incidents and similar locations suggests that the presence of heroin is stronger in that area of town. One strategy that the department could

attempt is concentrating police patrols within a designated radius of the clusters of overdoses. An increased police presence in the area may act as a deterrent for individuals who are considering purchasing drugs illegally. The location may serve as a focus of undercover work, in attempt to arrest dealers in the area. The apprehension of drug suppliers helps to reduce the trafficking of narcotics and acts as a deterrent for potential replacement dealers.

Strategically targeting drug dealers may prove to be an effective method of removing the supply of heroin from an area, but there is still the possibility of another dealer taking over if there is still a market for drugs. An effective approach may be both targeting suppliers while reaching out to addicts. If police officers can be adequately trained in intervention techniques, then they will find greater success in recruiting drug dependent individuals into treatment. Treating the citizens addicted to drugs, while simultaneously targeting the suppliers is a strategy that attacks the epidemic on two fronts.

Treatment Centers

After speaking with Dr. Fischer and various law enforcement personnel, it became apparent that treatment is widely considered the best course of action to counter the opioid epidemic. There are several treatment centers in the area, but the most significant obstacle is getting those with a substance abuse problem to agree to go in for rehabilitation. When fighting a drug addiction, an individual is not likely to recognize that he or she needs to seek treatment, as the top priority is focusing on when the next "fix" will be. Even if one is forced into treatment, it is difficult convincing one to stay for the full healing process.

After reaching out to several programs, the substance abuse treatment organization Right Turn agreed to an interview to discuss its methods and offer advice regarding treatment. Woody Giessmann, the founder of the organization, stresses the importance of a welcoming environment. He attributes the success of his program to simply treating those who come forward with kindness. Right Turn has seen a high retention rate of young adults, which he believes can be attributed to the structure of the program, as it does not feel like an institution or hospital. Once an individual comes into the program, Woody believes that he or she will be more likely to stay for the full treatment because of the welcoming atmosphere.

One of the most difficult parts of treatment is getting the substance abuser to admit that treatment is necessary and enter a program willingly. North Andover law enforcement often encounters repeat offenders when responding to overdoses and crimes. Forcing drug abusers into rehabilitation after an overdose is one solution that is discussed among some police personnel. Since the individual is clearly making detrimental decisions toward his or her own health, then some argue that law enforcement should be able to make decisions on his or her behalf, through Section 35, which would allow involuntary commitment to inpatient care (“Section 35: Commitment of Alcoholics or Substance Abusers”, n.d). While this would lead to more drug addicts entering treatment, it may also be a deterrent to the reporting of overdoses, which is the reasoning behind there currently being no punitive measures for an overdose. While it is not the same as prison, drug abusers may see forced treatment the same as being locked up. Giessmann stresses the importance of intervention when it comes to getting an individual to enter treatment. The program

workers specialize in early intervention in order to help the drug abuser recognize that treatment is necessary, which would hopefully help create a positive mindset (W. Giessmann, personal communication, November 15, 2016). Rather than force treatment after an overdose, it would be more effective for an expert interventionist to reach out and help the individual recognize that treatment and a changed lifestyle will be beneficial.

Giessmann is passionate about the program he has designed and encourages communities and law enforcement departments to contact Right Turn to help with the population's drug abusers. By enacting a policy to encourage individuals who overdose to meet with a treatment center representative, whether it be Right Turn or a comparable program, the town of North Andover could see a decrease in the number of its drug offenders. The number of overdoses in the first 9.5 months of 2016 was twenty-three, likely with some of the cases involving the same individuals. With the help of the North Andover police and Right Turn employees, those repeat drug offenders may receive the help that is needed and ultimately curb the number of addictions in the town.

Often treatment centers see patients come and go, with addicts returning to drug seeking behavior after a short stint in rehabilitation. Giessmann claims that Right Turn is more effective than typical programs because the organization focuses on retaining patients for full-length treatments. The first aspect of Right Turn's success is that it is continually working with insurance companies to provide patients with more than the typical twenty-eight day treatment period, which is all that is covered by most insurance companies. In addition to helping patients stay

longer, the program itself is considerably more affordable than many of its competition. By having parts of the treatment costs alleviated, individuals can receive adequate time in the program to experience full support and take advantage of all the organization's resources. Once in the program, Giessmann has designed a program for patients to receive comprehensive, evidence-based treatment.

Individuals who turn to drugs often suffer from underlying issues that have lead to destructive behavior. Right Turn helps patients overcome mental health problems, while working with them to handle stress in more constructive ways, attempting to help them deal with the underlying cause of drug use. Those in the program undergo psychiatry as well as both individual and group therapy, including sessions with family members. Incorporating family into treatment helps patients understand that they have support and teaches family how to assist with the rehabilitation process. Giessmann claims that collaborating with a patient's support group is crucial to treatment, as drug abusers need people to help them recover and stay healthy. This may be necessary for drug addicts, since they often alienate family and friends while abusing drugs. The therapy helps family better understand the situation and how to handle it. In addition to evidence-based treatment, Right Turn encourages creative expression to provide a comprehensive approach to rehabilitation, which Giessmann believes helps individuals return to a productive lifestyle.

Utilizing a treatment center, like Right Turn, as a resource to the department could aide in helping the community as a whole. Individuals suffering from drug addiction will be more likely to receive the treatment that they need to return to the

community as productive citizens. As a result, the town would observe a decrease in the presence of drugs and a drop in crimes committed through drug seeking behavior. The North Andover police department would greatly benefit from developing a connection with a treatment center and utilizing the organization's personnel and resources to curb the opioid epidemic in its jurisdiction and surrounding areas. One way to apply the program to its operations would be contacting a representative from Right Turn when an officer responds to an overdose or other opiate related crimes. The Right Turn employee would be made aware of the situation and try to meet with the individual to intervene and recruit him or her into the program.

Another course of action is having officers trained in intervention methods and collaborating with Right Turn, or a comparable program, to send the individuals who police intervene with to the program. While the Right Turn representatives are well trained, it is not practical to have an employee from the organization travel to North Andover for each overdose case, which could be in the middle of the night. It would be more time and cost effective to find a successful program in town or have the department's own personnel trained and become capable of performing an intervention when the need arises while on duty. Having the interventionists in town would save time in responding to situations and help start the conversation about treatment sooner. Once the individual agrees to enter treatment, the department representative could help execute a smooth transition into Right Turn, or other success proven treatment programs.

Training Officers in Intervention

The ARISE Network intervention program, based out of Colorado, specializes in the process of getting addicts to join the treatment program that is necessary. The top program recommended by Giessmann, ARISE is a highly successful organization that is able to get “over 83% of addicted individuals into treatment in 3 weeks” as well as 96% by 6 months (ARISE Network, n.d). The program focuses on helping addicts stabilize a connection with their family for support while garnering a commitment toward entering treatment. The ARISE statistics are evidence that the approach and techniques the organization utilizes are effective in helping addicts make the realization that treatment is necessary.

The organization also has a training service that helps educate others who seek to learn their intervention methods. Cara Bradley, the training manager, was interviewed regarding a possible training session for the North Andover police department, including opportunities and expected results. There are three major training events each year in the United States, as well as facility training where an ARISE representative travels to perform individual training sessions (C. Bradley, personal communication, December 8, 2016).

Attending a training event would allow an individual to become a “Certified ARISE Interventionist”, which Bradley stated would help learn the necessary language and develop the abilities needed to reach out to addicts. It is a three-day intensive training session, where registrants are taught the step-by-step method of the organization. While the starting registration fee is roughly \$2,000, Bradley stated she is willing to offer a discounted rate of \$4,500 for three police officers to attend training, excluding travel costs. Upon completion of the three-day training

period, the three registrants could return and share their findings with the rest of the department to help each officer develop the intervention skills. To best train the department as a whole, Bradley recommended sending three representatives who are effective at training others, have a background in mental health, and possess strong communication skills. Upcoming training sessions include February 2017 in Washington D.C. and June 2017 in Nashville, TN.

The option of hosting an ARISE representative for facility training is more expensive, as the training is specifically tailored for the group, in this case the police department. The advantage of a facility training session is the opportunity for a personalized curriculum, as opposed to the larger training events that are directed to a broad range of disciplines. When training a group of thirty people or less, Bradley stated that one instructor was sufficient, which would cost the department \$20,000; a group of over thirty would require two instructors and cost \$35,000. The details and costs of the two training options are summarized in Figure 3.

Training	Cost	Number of Officers	Focus of Training
Large Group Event	\$1,500 per officer	3	Broad range of disciplines
Facility Session	\$20,000 - \$35,000	1 – 30 - Over 30	Tailored to group

Figure 3: Costs of Training Options

While a facility session is considerably more expensive than sending three officers to a larger training, the benefits would be certifying a larger number of officers, while having the curriculum tailored to the department's needs. An option to lower the department's costs would be involving nearby police communities in the training session and splitting the fees.

Another option that the department can utilize is having a representative complete additional training to become an Intervention Supervisor, which would provide the ability to perform long-term intervention. Having a Supervisor affiliated with the department would be an alternative to sending addicts to treatment centers, such as Right Turn, as the representative would be capable of performing the full-length intervention process. The additional certification is \$500 per person.

Having police officers adequately trained by a prominent organization could diminish the number of calls and crimes initiated by repeat offenders. Being certified in intervention methods would help officers be capable of reaching out to addicts that they encounter on the job and getting them to join treatment, perhaps Right Turn. If successful, North Andover would experience less overdoses and a general decrease in crime.

Funding

Hundreds of people become victim of the opioid epidemic each year, as the extent of the problem continues to grow. North Andover has seen a sharp increase in overdoses in just one year, but immediate action could help prevent a likely further increase in that figure. By providing the police department with the necessary resources to adequately train officers, the problem can be directly handled from multiple fronts. Addressing the opioid epidemic can help decrease the presence of drugs, the number of overdoses, and the amount of general crime in the town. In order to achieve these objectives, an investment in the department is necessary to fully train officers and equip them with the necessary resources. With multiple courses of action to take in regards to training, the department can

determine the most cost effective approach. An increase in the police budget will likely be required to fund the training, but will serve as a necessary investment in the officers and the overall well being of the community.

Dissemination

The project was disseminated to the North Andover Police Department, where I discussed my findings with the Chief. He provided feedback on the suggestions and offered a response for each one. The aspect that he was most concerned with was recidivism rates at treatment centers. Right Turn advertises high success, but did not provide statistics. In order to implement new policy for the department, a new treatment center would have to be an empirically more successful alternative. The Chief also expressed interest in research regarding the impact of marijuana on the heroin epidemic.

Conclusion

This project provided me with an opportunity to develop in-depth knowledge of a critical problem that is growing rapidly in the country. While the area of study evolved and changed significantly as the project progressed, it was very rewarding to have contributed to the issue. The project proved challenging and, at times, involved complicated research obstacles, which ultimately provided more interesting and gratifying results.

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