

Leaders highlight early education for drug misuse prevention

September 22 2017, by Holly Ramer

More than 100 children in New Hampshire's largest city have witnessed an adult overdose in their home since 2016. Now, a police program that officials hope will be replicated elsewhere is working to prevent kids from meeting the same fate.

Political and law enforcement leaders came together Friday to promote early childhood education and intervention to prevent substance misuse. They highlighted Manchester's Adverse Childhood Experiences Response Team, which includes a police officer, crisis services advocate and behavioral health professional who respond to incidents and determine how best help the child, whether it be support groups, counseling or early childhood education programs.

The goal is to give children who witness violence or trauma the same kind of support crime victims receive in hopes of preventing future problems. Chief Nick Willard said the team has helped 203 children from 120 families, so far.

"What are we doing to help kids navigate life after these calls that we go on? Kids are seeing so much in their lives," he said at a news conference organized by Spark NH, a nonpartisan early childhood advisory council.

The governor-appointed group advocates for programs like Willard's and expanded access to [early childhood education](#), such as the Early Head Start program run by Southern New Hampshire Services where the news conference was held. Laura Milliken, director of Spark NH, said such

programs play an essential role in buffering children from toxic stress.

"Early [childhood](#) programs are the best prevention against substance misuse," she said.

Donnalee Lozeau, executive director of Southern New Hampshire Services, agreed.

"Even though some of these things we've seen before, we're seeing an increase," she said. "Grandparents raising their grandchildren. Homelessness going up when families are hit with this. Children's behavior in the classroom—very different. ... This opioid crisis and what it's doing to children is very different, and it's impacting in a way we haven't seen before."

Also attending the news conference were a policy adviser to Republican Gov. Chris Sununu and members of the state's Democratic Congressional delegation. They voiced opposition to the latest effort to repeal the Obama-era Affordable Care Act, saying it would destroy the state's Medicaid program that provides coverage for [substance misuse](#) and health care for children.

"That hurts our most vulnerable citizens, including our children who feel the impact of this at a disproportionate level," said Sen. Maggie Hassan.

New Hampshire has one of the highest drug overdose rates nationally. The Attorney General's office said this week that there were 226 overdose deaths through July, putting it on track to have fewer than the 485 deaths recorded last year. The number, however, is expected to be higher than the 439 recorded in 2015 and more than double the number of deaths in 2011.

Sununu, in a statement, said he takes no role more seriously than that of

"guardian for the next generation."

"As we stare into the opioid crisis that faces our state, we know that in the wake of those who suffer from addiction or who have fallen victim to death by overdose, there are countless friends, family members and of course, children," he said. "These [children](#), born into circumstances beyond their control and perhaps beyond their understanding are left to find a place in our society as productive and valued members of our community."

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