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\$1M federal grant aimed at bridging gap in drug treatment, support programs

It was a long shot. And Dante Hummel-Langerfeld knew it.

But as NHL Hall of Famer Wayne Gretzky has said, "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take."

Late last month, Rice County was awarded a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to help launch two programs designed to aid residents who are using or addicted to drugs before they become involved in the criminal justice system.

The three-year award builds on the work of the county's Opioid Response Council, which includes representatives from local law enforcement, K-12 education, family services, public health, nonprofits and culturally specific organizations.

The funding will address a significant gap in services, says Hummel-Langerfeld, Rice County Behavioral Health Unit supervisor who heads a team of social workers embedded with local law enforcement.

It's a gap Faribault Police Chief John Sherwin anticipated as the Behavioral Health Unit launched earlier this year. Sherwin, who became Faribault's chief in March, saw a similar gap in his prior job with Rochester Police.

Armed with that knowledge, the Opioid Response Council was able to quickly identify the void, enlist partners and make a convincing case for funding.

Sherwin says the programs, which carry very official-sounding names -- the Police-Assisted Recovery and Deflection Program and the Pre-Charge Adult Diversion Program -- will help "bridge the gap."

Law enforcement officers, he said, often encounter the same people, again and again and again. And while officers can tell when someone is spiraling out of control, they can do little more than take them to detox, an emergency room or jail -- all short-term strategies that don't address the drug abuse.



Clockwise from top left, Rice County Behavioral Health Unit Supervisor Dante Hummel-Langerfeld, Faribault Police Chief John Sherwin, Rice County Attorney John Fossum, Healthy Community Initiative Collaborative Health Projects Director Ashley Anderson, Northfield Police Chief Mark Elliott and Rice County Sheriff Jesse Thomas.

The challenge

The problem of illegal drugs in Rice County is well documented. Not only is the interstate that bisects it a known route for drug traffickers, opioid abuse -- including heroin and prescription painkillers -- took a foothold in the northern part of the county in the late 2000s and with it the lives of several young residents.

That scourge, now in communities across the country, continues to be a significant problem locally. According to information provided by Healthy Community Initiative, there were 28 known drug overdoses, four fatal, in Rice County in 2021; almost 20% took place in the rural areas. Law enforcement expects there are many other non-fatal ODs, which due to the availability of anti-opioids, were never reported.

Nationally, treatment admissions for those whose primary substance use was opioids increased by 77% from 2010-19, according to data from the Drug and Alcohol Abuse Normative Evaluation System. Methamphetamine treatment admissions were far higher, up 436% between 2010-20.

Substance abuse is a significant and growing problem among the jail population -- locally and across the country. And though the Rice County Sheriff's Office has utilized a social worker to help connect detainees to needed treatment, Sheriff Jesse Thomas believes that the early intervention program being planned can make a big difference for those abusing drugs and residents in general.

Rice County's rural location makes treatment options for local residents challenging; the planned opening of a Faribault treatment facility is likely two years out.

Also problematic is the lack of culturally specific options for Latine and Somali residents.

Getting members of those communities with substance abuse issues into treatment is complicated by the very real fear that not only they, but their entire family, would experience significant shame should the abuse become known.

HealthFinders Collaborative, a community health center with locations in Northfield and Faribault, will receive \$100,000 of the grant funding annually to employ Spanish and Somali coordinators who will guide participants through the process, and help them access local treatment and recovery resources.

The program will also include substance abuse treatment from providers of similar backgrounds outside Rice County, far enough removed so word of their struggles doesn't spread to the county's tight-knit communities.

SECOND GRANT

Rice County Community Services/Social Services has received a second federal grant, this one involves a peer exchange with six rural communities to learn and observe the successful aspects of a two-county substance abuse response program located in eastern North Carolina.

The grant covers all expenses and will allow five attendees, including Rice County's Behavioral Health Unit Supervisor Dante Hummel-Langerfeld, Child & Family Services Supervisor Heather Noble and Jail Administrator Jake Marinenko, to attend the two-day exchange. Rice County Judge Jeffrey Johnson, who oversees the county's Drug Treatment Court, and Community Action Center Family Recovery Support Coordinator Toby Anderson will also participate in the exchange.

Through this peer exchange, visiting teams can discuss and share best practices, exchange ideas and knowledge, and engage in peer networking events," according to information provided by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Once an individual is identified (likely by law enforcement or a social worker), agrees to treatment and the Rice County Attorney's Office enters them into its pre-charge diversion program, participants will have access to pre-treatment housing through Beyond Brink in Owatonna.

Hummel-Langerfeld underscores the importance of this step, noting how hard it is to find beds for those willing to enter treatment and that a return home in the interim risks restarting the cycle of drug abuse and contact with police. Once discharged from treatment, there will be space available in newly constructed housing from the Community Action Center. Though a stay there will be short-term, reacclimation will be gradual and include continued support.

The additional support "can be crucial in achieving success," says Northfield Police Chief Mark Elliott.

Improving lives

On the legal side, County Attorney John Fossum has nothing but praise for the plan. He'll assign an assistant county attorney to the program and anticipates no additional expense due to a corresponding drop in minor offenses.

He also sees a reduction for the courts, which won't be dealing with the number of petty crimes.

"Getting people into treatment early really is much better than (doing so) after years of struggling," said Fossum. "It reduces the need for prosecution and punishment when what we're really trying to do is treat a disease."

The grant also allows the county to hire another probation officer who will work with program participants and be an additional support in the community.

The mere existence of the Opioid Response Council, its work, as well as existing partnerships and relationships, made the grant application so strong and so complete, says Hummel-Langerfeld. In just three weeks, she, HCI Collaborative Health Projects Director Ashley Anderson, Rice County Deputy Administrator-Community Services Rick Gieseke and former Social Services Director Mark Shaw were able to complete an application that secured a highly competitive grant the partners believe will make a lasting difference in Rice County.

"I just think the timing was perfect on all ends," said Hummel-Langerfeld.

And while documenting and reporting results will be done quarterly, Faribault's Chief Sherwin expects some outcomes won't be quantifiable.

Illegal drugs are a social harm that shatter human relationships and families, he said, adding that by guiding people to sobriety, lives are improved.

"That's the thing you can't measure," he said.



Behavioral Health Unit Supervisor Dante Hummel-Langerfeld, left, explains the importance of the new \$1 million grant the county has received to help those who are abusing drugs. Also pictured is Sheriff Jesse Thomas. (Rice County photo)

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