

U.S.

Massachusetts Chief's Tack in Drug War: Steer Addicts to Rehab, Not Jail

By **KATHARINE Q. SEELYE** JAN. 24, 2016

CANTON, Ohio — Leonard Campanello, the police chief of Gloucester, Mass., took the microphone here in mid-December and opened with his usual warm-up line: I'm from Gloucester, he said in his heavy Boston accent. "That's spelled 'G-l-o-s-t-a-h.'"

A casually profane man with a philosophical bent, Chief Campanello, 48, first drew national attention last spring when he wrote on Facebook that the old war on drugs was lost and over. Convinced that addiction is a disease, not a crime or moral failing, he became the unusual law enforcement officer offering heroin users an alternative to prison.

"Any addict who walks into the police station with the remainder of their drug equipment (needles, etc.) or drugs and asks for help will NOT be charged," he wrote. "Instead we will walk them through the system toward detox and recovery" and send them for treatment "on the spot."

That post from a small-town police chief was shared more than 30,000 times and viewed by 2.4 million people. By June, his Police Department had

put his promise into action in what became known as Gloucester's Angel program.

Critics said that he did not have the authority to take the law into his own hands and forgo arrests. But other police departments, fed up with arresting addicts and getting nowhere, saw the Gloucester approach as a promising way to address the epidemic of heroin and prescription pain pills, which together killed 47,055 people in 2014 nationwide — more than died in car accidents, homicides or suicides.

Since the program began, 391 addicts have turned themselves in at the city's brick police station. About 40 percent are from the Gloucester area; the rest come from all over the country. All have been placed in treatment.

Just as surprisingly, 56 police departments in 17 states have started programs modeled on or inspired by Gloucester's, with 110 more preparing to do so.

In addition, 200 treatment centers across the country have signed on as partners. In six months, Gloucester, which steers people to treatment but does not itself provide it, has developed a nationwide network of centers willing to provide beds and take referrals by the police, regardless of whether the addict has insurance.

“This has the potential to be a disruptive innovation that changes the picture of how we deal with the disease,” said David Rosenbloom, a professor of health policy and management at the Boston University School of Public Health, who has been analyzing data for Gloucester. And it is a measure of the widespread desperation to move beyond the war on drugs that so many have been willing to try it.

These days, the chief is often on the road, addressing police departments, parents and treatment providers in speeches like the one here last month to 150 substance abuse clinicians, sponsored by the Mental Health and Recovery

Services Board of Stark County.

He told the audience how his officers had developed their own database of treatment sites, which they call over and over until they secure a bed.

“A bed not available at 10 a.m. might be available at 10:10, but they won’t tell you that,” Chief Campanello said. “If you want Bruce Springsteen tickets, you aren’t going to stop calling because you get a busy signal.”

But being matched with a bed is just the first step on the long, grueling road to recovery. Heroin retains such a ferocious grip on brain cells that relapses are viewed as part of the process.

Chief Campanello said addicts in his program were always welcomed back, no questions asked.

He then turned somber, telling the audience about a phone call he received that morning.

A man named Steve Jesi had called to say his daughter, Stephenie, 33, who had been in and out of the Gloucester program, had relapsed for a third time, overdosed and been found dead. She was the first person in the program who did not make it.

“Despite our best efforts, we know people will die,” Chief Campanello told the audience. “That doesn’t make it feel any better.”

His voice caught. His eyes welled with tears.

“I know it’s successful,” he said of the program. “And I know we’re saving lives. But we worry about the one we lost.”

The Eriks of the World

The youngest of four children, Mr. Campanello grew up in a Roman Catholic Italian family in Saugus, a blue-collar town 10 miles north of Boston.

His father was a department store salesman, while his mother raised the family.

In 1990, Mr. Campanello was studying criminal justice at Northeastern University in Boston, where he earned his bachelor's degree, when he joined the Saugus police force. He later earned a master's degree in criminal justice administration at Boston University.

Russell Campanello, his older brother by 12 years, a technology industry executive, tried to talk him into becoming a lawyer. But, Russell said, "he felt there were enough lawyers and not enough police on the street helping people."

During his 22 years on the Saugus force, Chief Campanello worked undercover in the narcotics unit for seven years. There, he met a boy named Erik whose parents were heroin addicts. Erik was using by age 12 and dead by 19.

"We arrested Erik a dozen times," Chief Campanello recalled one night on his way to O'Hare International Airport after participating in a panel discussion in Chicago.

"We thought things like 'Erik needs help,'" he said. "But there were no avenues for that, especially through the police force. It wasn't our responsibility."

In 2012, he became chief in Gloucester, a fishing town of 28,000 and the setting for "The Perfect Storm." The chief, who plays the piano by ear, is drawn to songs like Mr. Springsteen's "You're Missing," an elegy about loss after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. It reminds him, he said, of those who have lost someone to heroin.

And as head of a 60-person police force, he said, he was at last in a position to do something for the Eriks of the world.

With Compassion

The Gloucester Angel program grew out of a town forum last spring on the heroin crisis. Four people had died of overdoses in the first three months of 2015, more than had died in all of 2014. Residents said they wanted addicts treated with compassion.

The idea that addiction should be treated as a health issue instead of a crime has gained currency as heroin has spread from inner cities to the nation's suburbs, rural outposts and the white middle class.

Chief Campanello said the program, which operates around the clock, "is about a community's journey helping one another, a humanitarian effort that they wanted their Police Department to reflect."

When addicts show up, an officer calls on one of 55 "angels," local volunteers who are in recovery or otherwise familiar with addiction, to listen and offer moral support. The officer takes a history and starts dialing treatment facilities, where clinicians determine what treatment best suits the addict and of what duration. Beds have been found in as little as 17 minutes and as much as a couple of days. Some of those beds are as close as Gloucester; others, as far as California.

Many local businesses support the program: A pharmacy in Gloucester discounted naloxone, which reverses the effects of an overdose, and CVS and Walgreens followed suit. Taxi companies provide free rides to treatment facilities or the airport. The ambulance service offers a reduced rate.

The department spends an average of \$55 for each addict, Chief Campanello said, compared with \$220 spent to arrest, process and hold an addict in custody for a single day.

Most of the costs are borne by the Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative, which Chief Campanello founded last summer with John E.

Rosenthal, a businessman who lives in Gloucester. Mr. Rosenthal has worked to alleviate homelessness in Boston and founded Stop Handgun Violence.

The police initiative has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars and received millions in in-kind contributions, including placement in treatment centers. “When the chief wrote that blog post in the spring and got 2.4 million hits, he called and said, ‘Help!’” Mr. Rosenthal said. “I saw very quickly that this could be a tipping point.”

Among the program’s success stories is Kristina, 29, who had a steady job and lived near Gloucester. She did not want her last name used.

She broke an ankle, started out on pain pills and ultimately moved on to heroin. After about two years, she said, she started “creating wreckage” in her life, crashing her car and losing her apartment. She tried without success to find treatment on her own.

Finally, she said, facing jail time, she turned herself in at the Gloucester police station.

“They worked every avenue to get me into treatment,” Kristina said. Occasionally officers call to check on her. “They said, ‘If you ever need anything, the doors are still open, no matter what.’”

Still, the program has its critics.

Jonathan W. Blodgett, the district attorney of Essex County, where Gloucester is, warned Chief Campanello that he did not have the authority to offer amnesty to someone for the crime of heroin possession.

The chief and other law enforcement officers insist that the police have discretion when it comes to arrests.

Elizabeth D. Scheibel, a former district attorney for the Northwestern District of Massachusetts in Northampton, raises other questions. “Selective

enforcement” of the law, she said, “could well have a disparate impact on the constitutional rights of other offenders.”

And, she said, promising amnesty not only takes away an incentive to complete a treatment program, it could also complicate an investigation involving an addict who might have been involved in a serious crime before surrendering to the police.

Chief Campanello said that his officers pursued drug traffickers, and that some addicts had even pointed the police to their dealers. But during one speech, to officers in Belfast, Me., he realized he might come across as soft.

“I’m sounding less like a police chief and more like a social activist,” he said. “I’m going to have to go arrest somebody.”

Chief Campanello has laid out his philosophy — encapsulated in a bumper sticker on his office wall, “Strong Men Don’t Bully” — and the program’s nuts and bolts in officer-to-officer talks around the country. Chiefs from Scarborough, Me.; Cooperstown, N.Y.; Lodi, Ohio; and Rolling Meadows, Ill., among others, have sought his advice as they duplicated his program. So far, more than 400 addicts nationwide have turned themselves in at 56 police departments.

“Lenny triggered some amazing out-of-the-box thinking,” said Frederick Ryan, the chief in Arlington, Mass., a Boston suburb, which plans to offer its own amnesty program this year.

Gloucester’s mayor, Sefatia Romeo Theken, also stands behind the chief.

“I think it’s a fantastic program,” she said. “If we arrested every single addict, they’d just be back on the street.”

Of course, overdoses continue to occur. On Jan. 17, Gloucester grappled with four in a 24-hour period. Naloxone revived the addicts. And Chief Campanello again took to Facebook, reaching out to all addicts and assuring

them that if they turned themselves in, there would be no judgment.

“We accept you,” he posted.

“If you’re discouraged because you’ve tried before,” he wrote, “know that relapse is part of the disease, and we will be there again and again and again until you make it.”

Eulogies, Still

For all his efforts, sometimes all Chief Campanello can do is deliver a heartfelt eulogy, as he did for Stephenie Jesi on a frigid Saturday before Christmas.

Her problem started when she broke an ankle in 2012 and was prescribed OxyContin. She soon went from a good-paying job with Verizon and a nice home in Stoneham, about 10 miles north of Boston, to a losing battle with heroin.

A year ago, she went to rehab in Florida, but relapsed. “She was using again, and was off and running,” said her father, 62, a business consultant.

Over the next several months, it would be the same story of treatment, relapse and trouble.

Stephenie entered the Gloucester program in August, and the chief got her into a treatment facility. After further relapses, Chief Campanello got her into a second treatment facility, and then a third.

“There’s no manual about what to do,” said her mother, Cheryl Marlow, 61. “The chief was our only resource.”

On Dec. 8, Stephenie overdosed again, was treated at a hospital and was then discharged.

Three days later, she sent her parents an email saying she was on a waiting

list for a bed, but not through Gloucester.

“I don’t know how to put all my pieces back together, and this is very embarrassing to go through this in front of so many people who don’t understand anything about addiction,” she wrote. “The people who say, ‘If she really cared at all about her family, she would have stopped a long time ago,’ or, ‘she’s tried getting clean more times than I can count; what makes this time any different?’ — those are the kinds of questions that make this so embarrassing and so hard to come back each time.”

The next day, she exchanged texts with her mother, who asked if she had Chief Campanello’s number. She did. “I don’t know why she didn’t call him,” her mother said later.

Stephenie died that night, alone in a hotel room.

Her parents said that despite having lost their daughter, they were grateful to the chief and his officers for all they had done. “He was the only go-to person that I had to go to,” Mr. Jesi said.

They urged friends and family to make donations to the Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative and asked the chief to deliver their daughter’s eulogy.

Hundreds of mourners packed the church, St. Mary of the Annunciation, in Danvers. “Her death for us is a great loss, and one that we will suffer as a police department with all of you for a very, very long time,” Chief Campanello said.

His officers would redouble their efforts to fight the disease, he told the mourners. “We will, in the words of Dylan Thomas, rage against the dying of the light, again.” His voice cracked.

Stephenie’s four brothers carried her coffin to a waiting hearse. Gloucester police cars led the procession to the cemetery. She was buried next to her

grandparents.

A version of this article appears in print on January 25, 2016, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Throwing Away the Book, a Police Chief Stresses Rehab Over Jail .

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