

Overdose Awareness Event Series Addresses Loss, Recovery, and Prevention

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Peter Bruun, co-organizer of the 716 Candles Project with Healthy Lincoln County, talks with Flores Bourgon, founder of local nonprofit Coastal Rivers Conservation Trust on Sunday, Aug. 27. There's an appetite to talk about this, Bruun said. "There's an urgency, because silence is killing people, literally." Elizabeth Walzoni photo.

The 716 Candles Project, a series of community events observing International Overdose Awareness Day, has spanned Lincoln County this week with art displays, speeches, community conversations, and remembrances.

The project, led by Healthy Lincoln County and Damariscotta resident Peter Bruun, aims to increase community awareness and discussion around substance use and the opioid epidemic. It is named for the 716 people who died of overdoses in Maine last year, 13 of whom lived in Lincoln County, organizers said.

This January through June, Lincoln County emergency medical services reported responding to 81 nonfatal overdoses and five deaths, according to Cathy Cole, regional director of education at LincolnHealth and Pen Bay Medical Center. The total number of overdoses outside of those EMS agencies responded to is higher, Cole said.

Bruun, whose daughter died from an overdose 10 years ago, approached Healthy Lincoln County late last year to begin planning the events. Before moving to Maine, he spent years organizing cultural events around issues in Baltimore, Md.

He said he became aware of silent suffering around addiction in Lincoln County, particularly coming out the pandemic, and felt called to use his organizing skills again to address it.

"I could see all the pain," he said. "It was not being talked about here."

Bruun pointed the presence of Gov. Janet Mills, who plans to speak at one of the events on Thursday, Aug. 31, as recognition of the project's importance from the highest office in the state.

Music, activities, and tables from local organizations at Coastal Rivers Conservation Trust on Sunday, Aug. 27 celebrated Lights of Lincoln County - the survivors of substance use, people working to prevent it, and the memories of those who died from it.

A photo exhibit of the same name by Charles Richards was on display profiling people in recovery, those working in the field, and others affected. The black-and-white photos told the subjects' stories with captions detailing their experiences and perspectives.

Richards spent years as a police officer and a paramedic, eventually leaving the field because of post-traumatic stress disorder. When dealing with his own diagnosis, he said he realized people were often embarrassed to talk about what they were going through, though it helped him.

Community events like the 716 Candles Project are important to start those conversations, Richards said, and he hoped it would help others.

"I'm really glad to have been a part of it," he said. "I hope it had some positive impact."

Attendees in recovery, professionals who work in prevention and treatment, and people with loved ones who died from substance use all spoke at Saturday's event, many noting the importance of discussing addiction and building community locally.

Tim Cheney, a former heroin addict who has been in recovery for 42 years and is the founder of Enso Recovery, which provides medication-assisted treatment in Maine county jails, said community involvement and policy reform can only be achieved when people work together.

Enso Recovery was the first to bring suboxone treatment into Maine jails in 2018, he said.

"My mission in life is basically to alleviate suffering, to eliminate stigma by raising awareness and educating the community about addiction," he said. "It's an addictive disorder ... we need to look at this as a healthcare disorder and treat it as such. The only way to do that starts in the community."

Cheney said those in recovery need to forgive themselves, have a sense of belonging, and feel they have a purpose in life, which their community can help them do.

State Rep. Holly Stover, D-Boothbay, and Sen. Cameron Remy, D-Bristol, also made remarks about response on the state and local levels.

Will Matteson, substance use prevention coordinator for Healthy Lincoln County, said project organizers agreed resources for prevention and recovery are available, but community connection and visibility on the subject was lacking.

"We're shining light on network of people who are already involved in the work ... and identifying gaps," he said.

He said he does not believe a project like 716 Candles would have been possible a decade ago. Awareness has grown since then due to a spike in overdoses, he said.

According to Matteson, near-replacement of the heroin supply with the synthetic opioid fentanyl in recent years has greatly increased the risk of overdose. He described using it as "playing Russian roulette."

Matteson said users have to use more to stay high with fentanyl, meaning more exposure, and it also contaminates other drugs, such as cocaine, killing people who do not expect they will come across it.

"People know about it now because they have to," Matteson said.

Bruun said three people who had lost loved ones to overdoses have emailed him to say they needed to talk about their grief but did not know how, and were connecting to others through the project.

"Imagine how many more there are," Bruun said. "There's an appetite to talk about it. There's an urgency, because silence is killing people, literally."

Due to a rain delay, the Lights of Lincoln County event was moved to Sunday, conflicting with a Waldoboro event led by Medomak Valley High School students celebrating their #WhyYouMatter campaign with an open mic and musical performance.

Matteson said the students involved "did a rock star job pulling it together" without himself and Bruun, which he feels highlights the future of prevention efforts.

"One of the things we need to do on a regular basis is work that's youth centered and youth led. That's what prevention is at this point: weaving the fabric of a community where you don't need to lean on substance abuse," he said. "An important way to do that is to teach kids how to be members of a community."

After the project concludes, Matteson hopes it will grow into smaller, consistent opportunities.

"We formed a center of energy, and from there we need to do something more routine," he said. "What we really saw was a circle of people who are willing to show up in a field and say, 'Enough is enough, and this is something to care about.'"

International Overdose Awareness Day will be observed at the Boothbay commons from 1:30-3:30 p.m. with a speech from Gov. Janet Mills and a Love and Remembrance gathering will be held from 5-6 p.m. at the Congregational Church of Boothbay Harbor.

That evening, Wiscasset Art Walk will feature art and performance from 5-8 p.m., closing with a parade of candles for remembrance and unity.

For more information, go to 716candlesproject.wordpress.com.