


Local educator looking to create substance abuse, mental health smartphone app

Published July 31, 2016 7:29PM | Updated July 31, 2016 7:47PM

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Norwich — If Angela Duhaime gets her way, sometime in the near future those looking to get into recovery will be able to turn to a smartphone application to figure out which facilities have treatment beds available.

Duhaime, the community educator at Southeastern Regional Action Council (<http://www.sectrac.org/>), said her idea for the app is one of several born from the community meetings, forums and conversations that have been taking place throughout the region for more than a year.

Her vision, however, is more than a tool that will show open beds. In her mind, the app might have three tabs — prevention, intervention and treatment — and would focus on mental health in addition to substance abuse.

Within its digital walls, one could find everything from programs and activities for youth to information about where treatment centers are and how to connect with them.

“People are always saying, ‘We need a resource guide,’” Duhaime said. “But we’ve been making guides forever. They’re obsolete almost the minute they’re printed because programs close. They’re garbage within a week.”

Her app, she envisions, would be easily updateable — a one-stop shop for those who need or know someone who needs treatment, and for those who want to prevent themselves or someone else from ever getting to that stage.

Duhaime said she doesn’t know of any other app that shows open treatment beds. She was, however, inspired by coalitions similar to SERAC that already use applications to send out alerts about when they’re meeting or to provide downloadable information sheets.

In Connecticut, where more than twice as many people fatally overdosed (<http://www.theday.com/policefirecourts/20160215/fatal-drug-overdoses-in-connecticut-have-more-than-doubled-since-2012>) on drugs in 2015 as did in 2012, Duhaime said the organization and availability of information still is an issue.

“We’re hearing a lot of people saying they don’t know where to access resources,” she said. “It’s time and technology. It’s hard for people to sit down and do research when they’re in crisis.”

“This app would provide a streamlined way to do that,” she continued. “Everyone downloads apps. They’re very easy and at the tip of your fingers.”

She said first responders could point people to the app, too, rather than carrying cards to refer people to local providers that may or may not have any space.

The app, while it may allow people to more quickly be connected with a center that has an open bed, won’t fix the overall shortage in treatment beds (<http://www.theday.com/local/20160703/state-budget-cuts-eliminate-some-beds-for-addiction-treatment>), Duhaime acknowledged.

But perhaps it could offer those who can’t get right into treatment self-help strategies and tips or use other “creative solutions” to help people successfully pass the time before they can get professional help.

The idea, conceived in April, is just in the concept stage now, Duhaime explained, but she has plans to make great strides in its development in the coming months.

With the Norwich Heroin Task Force (<http://www.theday.com/policefirecourts/20160729/working-quietly-behind-scenes-norwich-task-force-tackles-opioid-crisis>) on board and the possibility that some money from SERAC's Drug-Free Communities grant (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/drug-free-communities-support-program>) could be put toward the app's creation — the latter she'll know more about by the end of August — Duhaime said the next step is finding a quality but low-cost or pro-bono developer willing to bring it to life.

She hasn't looked into the cost of developing an application and isn't sure whether groups like Southeastern Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence and Lawrence + Memorial Hospital would be willing to update the app daily, but she plans to soon get answers regarding those logistics, too.

"I would like to think the people that are responsible for treatment would be able to buy into this concept," Duhaime said. "In this day and age, there's still a lot of stigma about people who say they need mental health help or substance abuse treatment. I'm hoping with embracement of technology behind it — with us saying this issue is real and we know it, so much so that we want to make information about it easily accessible — that people will be more open and accepting."

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