

Chandler group offers help for opiate addicts and their loved ones

BY SRIANTHI PERERA
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Arizona lost 790 lives to opiate overdoses last year, so where do families in Chandler turn to for help?

A grassroots pilot named Chandler IAM Project was launched by the community to help opiate addicts in need of counseling and treatment to find hope, support and resources.

Every Tuesday from 1 to 5 p.m. at Chandler Presbyterian Church, 1900 S. Arrowhead Drive, volunteers from Chandler IAM will be available to

assess those who seek treatment and refer them to the program's partners. Medical insurance, although helpful, isn't mandatory to receive help.

Among the treatment partners on a burgeoning list are Addiction Haven of Chandler; Valley Hope, based in Chandler and Tempe; Awakening Recovery Center of Tempe and Calvary Healing Center of Phoenix.

"It's neat to have the different components of the community involved," said the Reverend Mike Japenga of the Chandler Presbyterian Church, himself a recovering addict and a licensed

substance abuse counselor with 15 years of experience.

Japenga, Mariah Hile, business development manager of Aurora Behavioral Health Systems and Jason Hutchings, executive director of Awakening Recovery Center, will provide free assessments, give treatment recommendations and other appropriate help to begin a path to recovery.

"The intent and hope for Chandler IAM project is to provide a safe, non-judgmental place where community members, despite their background and financial status, they will be treated

with compassion and respect, and they'll receive an evaluation and proper placement into appropriate treatment for opiates and opioids," said Ted Huntington, community programs manager of Chandler Coalition Against Youth Substance Abuse.

Huntington was speaking during the program's ribbon cutting at the church recently, which was followed by a candlelight vigil organized by Addiction Haven in honor of those lost to overdoses.

If the nonprofit program is successful, organizers said they plan to offer the

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model to other communities in the East Valley.

The Chandler IAM Project is named for 25-year-old Adam Melle of Gilbert, who died of an overdose in February 2016.

Melle's father, Randy, learned of the program after his son's death and joined the cause after attending many of its meetings.

"Through Adam's drug addiction and through all the problems that our family faced, another door was open and it was a chance for me and my family to help other people who experience the same problems and nightmares that we went through," said Melle, who is the designated treasurer and involved in fundraising.

Dale Walters, assistant chief of Chandler Police Department said that he met with families on almost a weekly basis: "Desperate parents that were out of options on how to deal with their children.

"They didn't know what else to do," he said. "They wanted to get them help. They didn't have insurance; the kids were out of control. The kids wanted help but they didn't know where to go.

"Seeing that day-in and day-out is overwhelmingly depressing for any law enforcement officer because we are an organization of fixers - we try to fix stuff," he added.

Walters said the Chandler Police Department often partners with the community to overcome its challenges, and this is one such opportunity.

"I realized early on this is not a problem we are going to be able to arrest our way out of," he said. "We have to find a solution. The most holistic approach is a



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Above: Ted Huntington, community programs manager of Chandler Coalition Against Youth Substance Abuse, cuts the ribbon during the opening of the Chandler IAM project at Chandler Presbyterian Church. **Right:** Randy Melle, whose son Adam died of a drug overdose last year, gave an emotional speech about the loss of his son.

grassroots buildup where everybody gets involved."

The project began when Chandler Police Chief Sean Duggan, Ed Upshaw, Chandler Heights Substation commander, and CCYSA officials met a year and a half ago and began identifying ways to deal

with the epidemic within the community.

"It took the village to come up with a solution on how to address those issues," Walters said. "It's been a long time coming."

Information: chandleriamproject.com

