

Church responds at the front lines of the nation's opioid crisis

Everyday in virtually every community in the United States someone overdoses from heroin, fentanyl or an opioid prescription painkiller such as Oxycontin. Many of them, even those people in their 20s and 30s, will die.

“These are our friends. These are our neighbors. These are our fellow worshipers,” said Jim Alvarez, a parishioner of St. Matthew Church in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Alvarez, a former photojournalist, produced a handful of videos profiling the struggles of families in the parish who had lost loved ones to the disease of drug addiction. Those videos were presented during a recent parish forum on the opioid crisis.

“We were seeing our parishioners going through these struggles,” Alvarez told Our Sunday Visitor. “We were burying kids – parishioners’ children – and young adults who were suffering from addiction and were overdosing.

“We knew it was a problem,” Alvarez continued. “We started to get concerned, so we went ahead and started talking about it.”

Church responds

St. Matthew Church is one example of how the Catholic Church is responding to the opioid epidemic, which over the past decade has ravaged communities across the country. Millions of people have died and countless others have had their lives upended by addiction.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, more than

130 people in the United States die each day after overdosing on opioids. In 2017, more than 47,000 Americans died from an opioid overdose.

“And it’s not just the deaths, which are tragic enough in and of themselves. But it’s also the fallout around the people who are struggling with addiction, even the ones who are able to regain their sobriety,” said Dr. Michael K. Horne, a licensed clinical psychologist who serves as director of clinical services for Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia.

Crisis

The epidemic has its roots in the late 1990s, when pharmaceutical companies began producing powerful opioid painkillers and telling the medical community that patients would not become addicted, even though some of those prescription drugs are almost molecularly identical to heroin. It was not long before it became clear that those drugs were just as addictive.

“Doctors were told that they could hand this stuff out like candy, no problem. Well, that was the beginning of a downward spiral for a lot of people,” said Jesuit Father Brian O’Donnell, the executive director of the Catholic Conference of West Virginia.

Working-class people who toiled for many years in factories, mills and coal mines sought relief from their pain, as did Americans in affluent neighborhoods and elsewhere who took prescription painkillers to recover from surgery. Since addiction cuts across all socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, racial and religious differences, the impact of the opioid epidemic has been felt everywhere, in rich and poor communities alike.

“In West Virginia, the impact has been pretty devastating.

Everyone knows somebody or some family that has been impacted,” Father O’Donnell said.

With the highest drug overdose death rate of any other state for nearly a decade, West Virginia has long been described as the ground zero of the opioid epidemic. In 2017, West Virginia, which has a population of just more than 1.8 million people, had 833 opioid-related overdose deaths. That figure was three times higher than the national rate of 14.6 deaths per 100,000 people.

“The state government and the faith community are really aware that this is a major issue – perhaps the major issue in West Virginia,” Father O’Donnell said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the total “economic burden” of prescription opioid misuse alone in the United States is \$78.5 billion a year. That takes into account the costs of health care, lost productivity, treatment and the involvement of the criminal justice system.

“There is so much damage from this that is done to people, in their families and in their communities. It just takes an incredible toll,” said Horne, who told OSV that the Diocese of Arlington and Catholic Charities are working with local communities to create parish-based responses to the crisis.

“The parish is going to be able to assist people in terms of not just providing support and accompaniment, but also encouraging them to go and reach out to the referral lists that Catholic Charities is helping to create,” Horne said.

In the Diocese of Arlington and elsewhere, Catholic social service agencies across the country are helping people who are struggling with drug addiction to find in-patient treatment and ongoing support services to help them get back on their feet. Some bishops have also spoken out, writing pastoral letters and public statements calling on government leaders to devote more resources to battle the crisis.

Isolation and disease

“There are a whole slew of services that people need,” Horne said. “The number one thing is to address the isolation.”

Those who work with people in recovery often speak about the need to tackle the stigma that is still often associated with addiction, especially to heroin and now fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid that is flooding American streets. A sense of shame and taboo still permeates society even after years of outreach and public awareness campaigns.

“One of the things we hear from families is, ‘We didn’t want to mention this because of the shame, the stigma. How can we tell those around us that this was going on in our family?’” said Horne, who added that parishes can cultivate a judgment-free environment where addiction is recognized as a disease.

“There has been a longstanding belief that addiction is the result of a moral failing,” Horne said.

Catholic moral teaching holds that drug abuse is deeply sinful. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (No. 2291) says that using drugs, except on strictly therapeutic grounds, is a “grave offense” that inflicts serious damage on human health and life. But given that addiction is now understood to be a disease that severely damages the brain’s circuitry, it can be said that the addict’s culpability is often greatly diminished, if not completely in some cases.

“Anytime you end up with an addiction to something, you become a slave to it,” Steve Bozza, the director of the Office for Life and Family for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, told OSV.

Bozza said the archdiocese offers “a ministry of accompaniment” to help people who are struggling with substance abuse disorder. “The Church has to be there to accompany them to help them (attain sobriety), many of our social service agencies do that,” Bozza said.

Father Liam Murphy, cofounder of the Mother of Mercy House in Kensington, a poor neighborhood in Philadelphia, told OSV that he has seen the opioid epidemic “explode” in the last five years.

“You see the impact in the people walking the streets, high all day, and being so blatant to the point that they’re shooting up in public, not even trying to hide it,” Father Murphy said. He added that neighbors try to be compassionate but become angry and frustrated when they see addicts passed out and sleeping on street corners and used needles on the streets.

Father Murphy said Mother of Mercy House, a neighborhood outreach center, provides a safe, clean, nonjudgmental setting where addicts can come, receive food and find resources when they are ready to enter recovery. Father Murphy also encouraged people who are interested to volunteer in similar efforts and see the humanity of people struggling with drug addiction.

Father O’Donnell said the Catholic Church in West Virginia has been involved in an ecumenical effort to hold workshops across the state to help people be able to counsel those who are struggling with addiction and to support their family members.

“There are signs of hope,” Father O’Donnell said. “People are banding together and are willing to be in this for the long haul, because there is no easy solution to this epidemic.”

Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.

What do we know about the opioid crisis?

The National Institute on Drug Abuse, www.drugabuse.gov, provides the following statistics on opioid abuse.

•

- Roughly 21-29% of patients prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse them.
 - Between 8-12% develop an opioid use disorder.
- An estimated 4-6% who misuse prescription opioids transition to heroin.
 - About 80% of people who use heroin first misused prescription opioids.
- Opioid overdoses increased 30% from July 2016 through September 2017 in 52 areas in 45 states.
- The Midwestern region saw opioid overdoses increase 70% from July 2016 through September 2017.
- Opioid overdoses in large cities increase by 54% in 16 states.