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### Stakeholders study childhood adversity

By ADAM URQUHART  
Staff Writer

NASHUA – Suicide and substance use disorder are only two of the the negative outcomes that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can lead to for an individual later in life.

Recognizing the impact ACEs and adverse community environments can have on the city's youngest community members, a group of legislators and community stakeholders convened at Southern New Hampshire Health on Monday morning for a panel discussion. The second annual Mayor's Opioid Task Force Legislative Breakfast featured several speakers, including Cynthia Whitaker of Greater Nashua Mental Health, Laura Milliken of Spark New Hampshire and Shannon Desilets of New Hampshire Choose Love Program.

The opioid crisis continues



Telegraph photo by ADAM URQUHART

From left, Cynthia Whitaker of Greater Nashua Mental Health, Laura Milliken of Spark New Hampshire and Shannon Desilets of New Hampshire Choose Love Program sit on a panel addressing attendees at the Mayor's Opioid Task Force Legislative Breakfast on Monday.

causing problems in the community, and a child living in an environment with a caretaker who suffers from substance

use disorder (SUD) is just one of many ACEs that can leave

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a lasting negative impact early on in their lives.

“When we started looking at addressing the opioid crisis and responding to the mayor’s call for the Mayor’s Opioid Task Force, and addressing the issues with the opioid crisis, we learned that there was some root causes to substance use disorder and depression, which go back to these adverse conditions,” Nashua Public Health and Community Services Director Bobbie Bagley said.

Milliken is director of the Spark NH Early Childhood Advisory Council. She said ACEs can include exposure to violence, physical and emotional abuse, living with a caregiver with mental illness or with SUD. The more ACEs a child is exposed to, the more likely he or she will experience short and long-term health problems.

Milliken referred to the CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. That original ACE study was conducted at Kaiser from 1995-97.

“There was a strong correlation between ACEs and depressive disorders and general poor mental health, suicidal behavior, also linked to drug and alcohol misuse and poor physical health outcomes, including heart disease, diabetes, stroke, asthma, some forms of cancer,” Milliken said. “So, the health implications are really important.”

Milliken said it is also important to note that caring adults can buffer toxic stress, reducing or even preventing its effect. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, “A child that had experienced at least four toxically stressful events was 15 times more likely to attempt suicide, three times more likely to suffer from depression, and four times more likely to become an alcoholic or intravenous drug user.”

Mayor Jim Donchess convened the Mayor’s Opioid Task Force six years ago to help drive the efforts of working collaboratively across multiple sections of the communities providers, among service agencies and community partners, to tackle the is-



sue of opioid addiction and SUD.

“We’ve also had a problem with suicide deaths and despair,” Donchess said. “We did see a 63% increase in the suicide death rate from 1999 to 2017. The national rate was 33%.”

As a response to this, the mayor and members of the Board of Aldermen formed the Suicide Prevention Task Force, which includes first responders, community stakeholders and the public health department. This task force was developed to combat the phenomenon of increased suicides.

Desilets is the New Hampshire Choose Love Program Coordinator and said that teenagers are reporting more loneliness than elderly folks, suggesting that cell phones have a lot to do with it being a different day and age. Desilets said there are far less human-to-human connections than in previous generations.

“When a child has connection and can feel safe, they’re better able to learn and they’re better able to cope with adversity as well,” Desilets said.

Whitaker is the chief of services at Greater Nashua Mental Health. She said when children are in an environment where there is a lot of adversity, their bodies adapt to survive, which unfortunately leads to adoption in a negative way such that the body then has negative health outcomes.

“It’s not something you’re born with or not born with – it’s something that the environment brings out in you by encouraging you, by teaching you, by supporting you through whatever it is you’ve already gone through,” Whitaker said.

When asked about an ideal piece of legislation, Milliken said ensuring that families have access to professional home visiting, both prenatally and for new parents, should be a priority.

“There’s obviously no magic wand, but collectively and actively working together we can all be part of the solution,” Desilets said.

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