

# Treatment, Not Punishment

## Vermont Treats Addiction Like a Disease

*Brittanie Harrod*

Why do drug addicts get sent to prison? How will this help them? The best thing to do is to put them in rehabilitation. Addiction is a disease that requires treatment. Many addicts get out of prison, and then go right back since they have not had treatment. Luckily, Vermont is taking the lead on

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treating addiction as a health issue rather than punishing addicts. I watched the movie, "The Hungry Heart." I noticed that many of the addicts came from troubled families and didn't

have much support. They talked about how they were in and out of jail throughout the years. When they get out of prison, they have no one to lean on and there are not enough treatment programs, so they get involved with the wrong people and their addiction becomes a problem once again. If they were admitted to a drug treatment program, they would be around peers who are living with addictions. They would get treated for their disease, they would have less chance of relapse, and they would have people to turn to when they have trouble coping.

Vermont has a heroin problem. According to *USA Today*, our state has the second highest per capita rate of heroin and opiate use in the country. The government and the police are still trying to stop the flow of drugs into Vermont. In 2013, there were twice as many federal indictments against heroin dealers than in the prior two years. But the

state is also addressing demand. In August 2014, *Business Week* reported that Vermont is rolling out ways to treat drug addicts, including:

- Offering people who are caught using or in possession of heroin the chance to avoid prosecution by enrolling in treatment
- Giving addicts greater access to synthetic heroin substitutes to help them kick the habit.
- Shielding heroin users from arrest if they call 911 to help someone who has overdosed.
- Making the drug naloxone available in pharmacies without a prescription and giving it to police and EMTs to carry with them on their shifts. (Naloxone saves lives by reversing the effects of a heroin overdose.)

In his State of the State address in January 2014, Governor Peter Shumlin announced that Vermont will get a \$10 million federal grant to expand early intervention and treatment programs for drug addicts. He not only said that drug addiction is a health problem, he also pointed attention to root causes. He said, "If you listen to the voices of addiction, you hear the underlying cause of this disease for too many: a lack of hope and opportunity." He went on to say that it is time "to reframe the way we solve drug addiction and drug crime in Vermont." Personally, I agree.

*Brittanie Harrod is a 17-year-old student at Vermont Adult Learning in St. Albans, Vermont. She is earning a diploma from Bellows Free Academy. In addition to her education, Brittanie works part-time as a PCA and has a daughter, Madelyn.*

**Sources:** <thehungryheartmovie.org>; <www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/06/12/vermonts-heroin-fight-into-second-year-results-mixed/9715655/>; <www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-08-21/vermont-quits-war-on-drugs-to-treat-heroin-abuse-as-health-issue>; <governor.vermont.gov>.



### What do you think?

Should we treat addiction like a disease?