For Immediate Release

“If I have the means to give them a second, third, fourth or fifth chance, I’m going to.”

MORGANTOWN, WV (Nov. 27, 2019) — As a Desert Storm military veteran and a former emergency medical technician (EMT), Deputy Jason D. Morgan, a member of Monongalia County Health Department’s Quick Response Team (QRT), has several different skills to bring to his job as he helps fight the war against the opioid crisis.

But it hasn’t been easy, especially in the days before police officers started traveling with naloxone, which reverses the effects of an opioid overdose.

“We would go out on an overdose call and we’d have to wait until EMS showed up with naloxone,” Morgan said. One time, however, “I was able to assist with rescue breathing. The fire department had a combitube and a bag valve mask and I was able to intubate the kid and keep the oxygen flowing.”

Now, Morgan travels with several doses of naloxone in his cruiser and estimates he has had to use it five or six times to revive people who have overdosed.

Because of his background as an EMT, Morgan, who has been with the sheriff’s department for nearly 12 years, was an obvious choice to join MCHD’s QRT.

The county-wide QRT has been meeting weekly since May, thanks to a $230,000 grant from the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Office of Maternal, Child and Family Health that was awarded to MCHD last year. West Virginia is one of the hardest-hit states in the nation’s ongoing opioid crisis, and Monongalia County ranks fifth in overdose deaths in the state.

In addition to law enforcement, the QRT is comprised of Monongalia County Health Department employees, peer recovery coaches who are certified coaches with lived
addiction experience, first responders, a pharmacist and other interested community members.

As a first responder, Morgan is one of the members who shares overdose reports to a HIPAA-compliant Dropbox account. Peer recovery coaches from West Virginia Peers frequently check the account so they can make contact with individuals who overdose within 24 to 72 hours of the incident, to help connect them to treatment and other services.

Interacting with the MCHD QRT’s peer recovery coaches, including Jon Dower and Dan McCawley of WV PEERS (Enhancing Education, Recovery, and Survival), has been an eye-opener for Morgan.

“Dan, I don’t know his full story, but he’s one of those success stories that I like for a lot of people to hear,” Morgan said. “He runs a sober living house and he’s a peer counselor.”

McCawley returns the praise. “Deputy Morgan has become an essential member of the QRT,” he said. “He has the compassion to understand that sometimes treatment for substance use disorder will have a better outcome than incarceration for individuals that have committed petty crimes to support their drug habits.”

Morgan also realizes that when it comes to helping individuals who have overdosed, they will be more likely to listen to peer recovery coaches and learn by their example.

“Theyir approach is, ‘We’ve been in their shoes. We were drug addicts.’ It opens the mind up. If they can overcome it, maybe other people can too.”

Working with fellow team members who have that experience has strengthened Morgan’s notion that people he encounters who have substance use disorder simply need help. And if he can be the one to reach out and help save a life, that’s all the better.

He realizes that his outlook is different than those of some other law enforcement officers. “I don’t want to say they don’t care,” he said. “It gets nerve-racking, dealing with the same people over and over again.

“My outlook is, that could be a mother, a father, someone’s child. If I have the means to give them a second, third, fourth or fifth chance, I’m going to.”

He recalls talking to a woman about a non-drug-related case who happened to mention that her mother and sister work at an out-of-state hospital.
The woman discussed that someone who her mother and sister had treated had overdosed on crystal methamphetamine. She mentioned a term about that person’s prognosis that Morgan has heard others use before when discussing the opioid crisis: “Natural selection.”

“And I explained to her my outlook: ‘It’s a menace, and it’s a hassle a lot of times, but again, that person could be a mother, a father, a child. And I’m just one of those people who thinks they deserve a second chance at life.’”

By the time they got off the phone, Morgan felt like he had made an impact on the woman’s thinking.

“It’s not about natural selection,” he said. “It’s a person, a drug addict, either trying to quit, or they don’t want to quit. But they can’t beat it. I asked her if she had smoked. It’s like smoking. It’s hard to just quit, and that’s the way it is with someone who is addicted to drugs.”

Morgan notes that he smoked for 30 years and he was able to quit, so he understands that analogy.

“It’s a nicotine addiction,” he said. “What’s different between a nicotine addict and a drug addict is that I’m not going out stealing to get that next nicotine fix. People who smoke aren’t trafficking their bodies. That’s what the problem is here.”

It’s difficult for Morgan to know the number of overdose calls the area gets, because he’s mostly familiar with the ones that are dispatched to the Monongalia County Sheriff’s Department. MECCA 911, West Virginia State Police and the police departments in Morgantown, Westover, Granville and Star City, along with West Virginia University’s University Police Department, have their own calls as well.

But he estimates that his department gets two to five a week.

“Sometimes there are four or five in a day,” he added. “It depends on the batch of dope in town.”

Drugs are sometimes laced with heroin or fentanyl, which can be more likely to cause harm, especially to an unsuspecting user.

“They don’t realize it’s laced, and it can kill them,” Morgan said.

Morgan appreciates the contacts he’s made as part of the QRT. Mapping done by Stacy Tressler, the QRT’s data collection manager, has also been helpful, as has been the ability to ask questions of pharmacist Michael LeMasters of Pierpont Landing Pharmacy.
But Morgan does have concerns about not having enough officers to combat the problem. He noted that Monongalia County Sheriff’s Department 40 officers are simply not enough.

“This county does not have the manpower to control the drug epidemic,” he said.

In the meantime, he hopes area residents will be proactive and let law enforcement know if they witness or hear of any suspicious activity.

“I’ve heard people say, ‘This has been going on for three months,’” he said. “But it’s the first I’ve heard of it. We can’t be everywhere at one time.”

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