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Destigmatize Addiction Through Education

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Abstract

After interning at Valley Health Associates the problem identified was the lack of education on substance abuse. With much of Salinas being multicultural and spanish speaking, we begin to identify the challenges associated with getting information to the public about substance use and the treatment options. Some contributing factors associated with the lack of education on substance use are family, social, and environmental factors, lack of education overall, and the stigma/shame associated with substance use; however the unfortunate consequences associated with this are misconceptions about drugs overall and an increase of fatal overdoses. The capstone project will focus on individuals recovering and discussing their story . Though this project has not gone as smoothly as hoped for thus far, the hope is that moving forward it will be able to be completed and bring awareness to the issue of substance use and educate the community on treatment options. The findings so far have been limited as COVID-19 has made gaining access to individuals that much harder. There is also some belief that being recorded makes it harder. There are people who do not mind sharing their story however being vocal about it with society is much different.

Keywords: Addiction, Stigma, Treatment

Agency & Communities Served

Valley Health Associates is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization located in Salinas, California. Valley Health Associates, or VHA for short, offers Medication Assisted Treatment as well as other evidence-based methods for those suffering from opioid use disorders. Valley Health Associates main focus is to “promote recovery and wellness through healthy and productive lifestyle changes while using a whole-person approach to care”. VHA was established in 1992 and has grown to be one of the most respected organizations of its kind servicing both youth and adults.

While VHA offers a lot for the community as do other agencies similar to them, the one thing that makes VHA stand out is their youth outpatient treatment program. The youth outpatient program started at VHA in 2019 and although it is a newer program within VHA it has reached many young individuals' lives with much more to come. This program offers an alternative for young people to get addiction treatment with the hope that it happens before they get tossed into the system. The youth program is divided into two different programs; there is a youth program which serves 12-17 years old and an alternative youth program serving 18-24 year olds.

Problem Description

There is a significant lack of education on and about substance use in the community and one significant contributing factor is the stigma surrounding addiction. Addiction is often met with feelings of shame and embarrassment. The last thing someone suffering from a disease is to be told that they are addicts or junkies, to name a few. It is that feeling of shame and embarrassment that often keeps people from taking the first step into treatment. Being mindful of

the language we use when addressing this sensitive topic is something to keep in mind, even as professionals.

Contributing Factors

Research supports that there is a significant outpour of fentanyl hitting our community and it's greatly impacting our youth. To make matters worse, it is almost impossible to spot if you do not know what you are looking for. Fentanyl is not just being sold as pills it is also getting laced into other substances. Dr. Nora Volkow, head of the National Institute of Drug Abuse, said "It's rare to find people who only overdose on cocaine or who only overdose on methamphetamines....fentanyl is being used to lace the illicit drug market because it's very profitable" (Mann, 2021).

There is definitely a stigma attached to addiction and addiction treatment which is why many people feel they do not reach out for help. According to a documentary, *Addiction*, "overdose is the number one cause of death for those under 50" (Public Broadcasting Service, *Addiction*, 2018). This is a treatable illness and we need to start treating it as such. The more we educate the public about addiction and treatment options the more we can begin to adapt and start to get more people into treatment. This documentary also mentions in one day there were 26 overdoses and not one single person was ever admitted into a treatment facility. This definitely raises the question of why.

Consequences

One does not need research based evidence to show that if we do not get individuals more effective treatment options we will lose them to an overdose or the system. The truth of the matter is we have hospitals and jails filled with people who belong in treatment facilities. Most

of the individuals who suffer from a substance use disorder also have a mental health diagnosis. With many people getting their news and information from social media an individual may run across an advertisement with a misconception about drugs. It is these misconceptions that we can avoid by educating the community on the facts of substance use.

With the misconceptions and most street drugs being laced comes the devastating consequences of overdoses. For those who do not know what to look out for as the warning signs of an overdose may not think anything of it or worse, those who know may not want to do anything in fear of getting in trouble and this is why education is important. Educating individuals on the dangers of drug use, warning signs of overdose, and laws like the Good Samaritan Law can begin to move in the right direction.

Problem Model

| Contributing Factors | Problem | Consequences |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Family, Social and Environmental Factors | Lack of Education on/about Substance Use in Monterey County Community | Misconceptions |
| Lack of Education Overall | | Increase in Overdoses |
| Stigma/Shame | | |

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project

As part of this capstone project, one on one interviews will be conducted with various individuals, both personally and professionally, to bring awareness to substance use disorder (SUD) as well as who Valley Health Associates is and why they are so vital to the Monterey County community that they serve. From the one on one interviews they will then be placed into

a more full length video that will feature others stories as well with the intention to bring awareness to the stigma surrounding addiction and how we can better help this community in need.

Project Purpose

There is a significant need for awareness about addiction to be brought to our community, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic significantly increasing the number of overdose deaths. According to provisional data, released by the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, more than 93,000 drug overdose deaths occurred in 2020 which is a 29.4% increase in the 72,151 deaths projected for 2019. More specifically, opiate overdoses increased from 50,963 in 2019 to 69,710 in 2020 (*Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts, 2021*). Without more awareness and education being brought forward, especially during such an already vulnerable time, we will continue to lose people to the disease of addiction. One factor that contributes to the stigma associated with addiction is our language. We need to begin educating ourselves to destigmatize and eventually, decriminalize addiction.

In a survey conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs In this survey there were 1,054 participants with some rather questionable statistics. Over “70% of respondents would not want a person in active opioid addiction to join their families through marriage, and 58% wouldn't want to work closely with that person. Only 18% would be "very willing" to have a person in active addiction as a friend. It's interesting to note that 58% also say their community needs to do more to reduce stigma and discrimination”. Needless to say, individuals are acknowledging there is an issue surrounding addiction, but their perception and willingness to engage addiction is almost at a standstill (Miller, 2018).

Project Justification

One on one interviews will be conducted with various individuals to bring awareness to how many people suffer from a substance use disorder. Valley Health Associates is a nonprofit organization that offers addiction treatment and resources and this video project will help contribute to their overall mission and overall bring awareness to the issue this is in our community.

Project Implementation

The plan is to implement this project in various steps. Beginning with creating a flyer asking individuals for their stories, why the stories will be needed as well as why they are important and my necessary contact information. The goal is to gather at least 5-8 individuals to participate in this project both personally and professionally. After video interviews are conducted they will then be put together into a full length video which will be shown on the VHA website.

Assessment Plan

To measure the effectiveness of this video project the plan is to share it on a public platform and monitor it closely. With special attention aimed at the view count, play rate, engagement, social sharing and feedback. This information will gather data on how many people are watching the view, an average of how long, how they are engaging with the video as well as the number of likes, comments and shares. This data information will then be used to measure the effectiveness. Though we cannot directly measure whether or not the video will change people's minds about the stigma of addiction, we can pay attention to whether or not there is an increase in cases.

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcome is that people will know the statistics of addiction and be informed about options in the community for treatment. Other expectations for this project are to bring awareness to addiction. The hope is that with this video, we destigmatize addiction and start focusing on more preventative measures and when we can not, we need to focus on effective intervention treatment so the individual can be a productive member of society.

Project Results

The project did not achieve its expected outcome so far because the limited access to individuals to interview for the process and the COVID-19 pandemic did not make it any easier as communication methods varied throughout the internship from Zoom, to phone calls, and tons of emails. Though the project is not finalized and ready for viewing just yet the expectation is that it will reach enough views to bring more awareness to the issue and more referrals of individuals wanting treatment services into my current internship site, Valley Health Associates.

If times were different then this project could have really opened up doors for people to know they are not alone in their addiction.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Given the project results did not turn out as great as expected given both the lack of video testimonies and the number of individuals it reached overall, my recommendations to the agency would be to continue addressing the community as a whole and educating them on the issue at hand and what they can do to help. The longer we stay in the dark about these uncomfortable situations the more people suffer in silence and possibly lose their lives. *It is time to take a stand against the stigma associated with addiction and recover out loud for those who cannot.*

Personal Reflection

The capstone project was focused on addressing the lack of education on substance use through education using a full-length video (about an hour) featuring a personal testimony and interviews from Lonny and Dr. Reb Close from CHOMP. While the planning and implementation of the project were successful the project did not reach its desired outcomes. The project was viewed 27 times within a week's timeframe with 3 likes. The video will continue to be posted until December 31st, 2021. The belief was that making it more personalized and involving someone who is in recovery and one on the front lines of this opioid pandemic would help ensure the impact that substance use is having on our community and educating the community on resources for treatment. Given that we're in the middle of a global pandemic the interviews were conducted via Zoom and could have been done in a more professional matter had the timing and proper resources been available. Although I believe the global pandemic had a slight impact on the number of participants, I strongly believe it was more the stigma and shame associated with being in a vulnerable state to acknowledge the addiction and the events leading up to it or even after that really impacted the number of participants.

Overall, the experience of being able to complete something like this was something to cherish for a lifetime. Being able to step outside my comfort zone and be vulnerable helped me learn about myself and grow both personally and professionally. It allowed me the confidence to know I can accomplish whatever I set my mind to do. In order to continue addressing the issue we need to continue recovering out loud for those who can not and for those who have not. The more we deny the problem or act like it is not one the bigger the issue becomes while people lose their lives. We need to stop allowing people to suffer in silence and shame and allow them the opportunity to be able to get the necessary treatment and resources to become a successful member of society.

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Appendix A**Scope of Work**

| Activities | Deliverables | Timeline/Deadlines | Supporting Staff |
|------------------------|--------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Create flyer | | May 2021 | Mentor |
| Gather participants | | By Sept. 2021 | Mentor and Other Supporting Staff |
| Conduct interviews | | Sept-Oct. 2021 | Mentor |
| Finalize video project | | Nov. 2021 | Mentor |