



'Has damage already been done?'

Questions swirl on high lead levels in Bordentown drinking water

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"How long has this been going on?" asked Louis Lupinacci as he stood outside his Bordentown Township home in early April, frustration in his voice.

"Flint, Michigan," he added. "Is that what we have here?"
Lupinacci is one of more than 20 homeowners recently notified by the Bordentown City Water Department that lead levels in their drinking water are above federal safety limits. The system serves about 16,000 people in Bordentown City, Bordentown Township and Fieldsboro.
The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, which enforces the EPA's

rules, is requiring the utility to increase its monitoring for lead, come up with a potential action plan, and take measures such as communicating with the public. All signs show the water department is following through on those requirements.
But what's missing, according to residents and experts with whom this news organization spoke, is the bigger
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Sarah O'Brien, of Bordentown City, gets a glass of water. Her home is one of many that have tested high for lead in the past year. [NANCY ROKOS / STAFF PHOTO-JOURNALIST]

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STATE OF EMERGENCY



Jason Wasylenko, 32, in his Falls home earlier this month. Wasylenko has spent a total of about 11 years behind bars since 2003, as he battled his heroin addiction. [PHOTOS BY KIM WEIMER / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

For some struggling with addiction, jail has become de facto treatment

By Marion Callahan, Kelly Kultys and Jenny Wagner
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Jason Wasylenko gave the prison employee his sizes and was handed a pair of jeans and a chambray shirt.
The 32-year-old gathered his belongings — some art made by other inmates, sports posters, a TV and stereo, books and knickknacks — and left his cell of the last three years.
He went to medical, then the business office. He filled out paperwork and verified his identity so the guards at the State Correctional Institution in Rockview, in Centre County, Pennsylvania, knew

they were releasing the right person. He'd been through it all several times before.
Still, he was anxious.
Jason was accustomed to life behind the wall. He knew what to expect. And he knew what to expect after he was released, too — both good and bad.
"When you go in and you're putting all your baggage at the curb, when you come out that baggage is still sitting there waiting for you," he said. "And some people's bags are a lot heavier or lighter than others."
For as many as 70 percent to 80 percent of inmates, including Jason, that baggage
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Wasylenko plays with dogs at Falls Township Community Park.
"When you go in and you're putting all your baggage at the curb, when you come out that baggage is still sitting there waiting for you. And some people's bags are a lot heavier or lighter than others."
Jason Wasylenko

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includes problems with drug use, national studies have shown. But with limited access to treatment on the inside and tools to deal with addiction on the outside, approximately 95 percent of them use again after they are released, according to the National Association of Drug Court Professionals. Sixty percent to 80 percent commit new crimes, the organization said.

Locked in that cycle, many like Jason end up back behind bars. Jail becomes their de facto treatment.

For people struggling with addiction, jail may not be the best option, according to Dan Rosenberg, a criminal defense attorney in Mount Holly who specializes in working with clients who have committed crimes due to addiction.

"They're not addressing the underlying problem," he said. "That's a Band-Aid on a broken arm, because once they get out, it's life skills, it's breaking the pattern of addiction."

Rosenberg would know. His brother-in-law died at age 21 of an overdose in August 2012.

"He was in (jail) for four months and he got out, and two days later he overdosed," Rosenberg said. "We suspect that he tried to do the same amount of drugs without learning how to stay sober."

Providing treatment in jails and prisons has been found to reduce recidivism rates in national studies, but the things that improve the outcomes for inmates are the same as for the general population, said Ken Martz, special projects consultant for Gaudenzia Inc., who has worked with prisons in Maryland and Pennsylvania.

"Study after study, decade after decade, the No. 1 predictor of outcome is length of treatment," said Martz, who also served for several years as special assistant to the secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs.

"Treatment occurs in the context of a relationship," he said. "Where I begin to know that I can trust you and can begin to share the secrets of my shame and trauma, my abuse history. That, I'm not going to do on day one."

For residential or outpatient treatment, the National Institute on Drug Abuse recommends at least 90 days, and longer courses for better outcomes. But also of importance, Martz said, is intensity of treatment, and care that continues into the community.

That's not always what inmates get, but some in the corrections industry are seeking to change that.

Some jails and prisons have created therapeutic communities where inmates with addiction live together in a recovery-focused environment and receive some type of treatment, and more also are beginning to provide aftercare when inmates are released, which further improves outcomes, according to NIDA.

In April 2017, the New Jersey Department of Corrections reopened the Mid-State Correctional Facility, at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, as the state's first licensed drug treatment center for state prisoners. The Gateway Foundation, a nonprofit provider of alcohol and drug treatment services based in Chicago, was contracted to provide treatment and counseling to the male inmates at the almost 700-bed facility.

The idea was first proposed by then-Gov. Chris Christie during his 2016 State of the State Address. At the time of the facility's reopening, Christie praised it as a way to give those committing crimes related to their addiction a second chance.

The Burlington County Jail also recently began offering medication-assisted treatment for inmates with substance use disorder as part of a one-year pilot program launched in January, through a grant from the New Jersey Department of Corrections.

"It is our goal to accomplish



Jason Wasylenko, left, takes a walk with his dog Harley and cousin Steve Kuc at Falls Township Community Park. Wasylenko said he's been spending a lot more time with family since he was released from prison. [KIM WEIMER / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]



Michael Sarubbi helps connect people with substance abuse disorder with treatment through the New Jersey Treatment Incentive Program. [CARL KOSOLA / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

two important objectives through this pilot program: We will get inmates battling opioid addiction much-needed treatment, while lowering our use of county tax dollars at the jail by reducing recidivism," county spokesman Jason Tosches said in an email.

An estimated 30 percent to 40 percent of the inmates who enter the jail each month have a substance use disorder, according to Tosches. He said they are monitoring those individuals for withdrawal symptoms and to determine if they are eligible for the medication-assisted treatment program or additional services.

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On the cold March day Jason was released, his mother, Sheryl Robas, and his younger sister, Nicole Wasylenko, were waiting for him. Nicole had picked out clothes and packed them in a duffel bag with some toiletries.

They stopped at the first gas station they passed on the way home to Falls, Pennsylvania, so Jason could put on his own outfit, rather than the prison-issued fare, and "blend back in with society."

But he knew that would be harder than just changing his clothes.

Jason started using marijuana and prescription drugs as a teen, and then moved on to heroin when his father died shortly after he graduated from high school. He went to detox and rehab about 10 times when he was younger, but it was always for the wrong reasons.

Heroin changed everything, including what Jason would do to get it and avoid withdrawal. He started stealing from retail stores, but that didn't cut it after a while. He started selling drugs.

"My out was, if I sell (heroin), I'll always have it. So then I'll be making the money for my addiction and I don't even have to go anywhere — I'll have it right here and people will come to me," he said. "I have the best of both worlds. I feel like I'm the man cause everybody's calling

me up asking what's up, and at the same time the countdown's not on my mind as much."

At one point, Jason's mother suggested he go live with family members in Colorado.

"The morning we leave, I'm in my bedroom and I'm getting high," Jason said. "I'm using needles at this time, so I'm shooting heroin."

He "white knuckled it" when he got there. And it stuck. He stayed sober for a year and a half.

"That was the most productive and happy time of my life," he said. "I was 21, 22 years old. I had my own apartment. I was paying my own bills. I was independent, self-reliant. I was living the dream. I was a success story at that time. I made it. But yet again, you get cocky or just complacent."

Jason moved back home. He'll never forget that first time he relapsed, he said.

"It was in that same exact bedroom. I remember as soon as I put it together and used, thinking to myself, 'Wow, everything I just accomplished over the last 18, 19 months is completely gone and I'm right back where I was,'" he said. "All that just seems like a dream, like it never happened, like it's just been completely erased and here I am sitting in the same exact spot on my bed with a needle in my hand."

Eventually, detox and rehab was replaced by jail. It wasn't treatment, but it took away the option to use, and he couldn't sign himself out.

"Nobody ever wants to go (to jail) — unless you really have no place to go, and sadly, some people do that," Jason said. "But in the back of your mind you know from past history once you start using again that's going to be the end result."

This was Jason's fourth stint in state prison. He's spent a total of about 11 years behind bars since 2003.

"I said to him, 'I don't know what your favorite color is. I don't know what your favorite food is,'" Sheryl said, recalling



Evan Cherry credits the NJTIP program with saving his life from drug addiction. [NANCY ROKOS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

a past conversation. "It's sad because I don't know my son."

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Criminal activity and active addiction often go hand in hand, according to officials.

"A lot of the drug-related crimes — whether it's burglary, shoplifting — those aren't the problems," said Rosenberg, the attorney. "Those are symptoms."

Riverside Lt. Lou Fisher was one of the first in the area to spot those symptoms back in 2013 and 2014, when he realized he and his fellow officers were locking up the same people again and again for petty theft, burglary and similar charges. That's how he decided to launch what was then the Riverside Treatment Incentive Program — now NJTIP — back in 2014, with certified interventionist Michael Sarubbi.

"I think it's been proven that incarcerating people for nonviolent crimes who are suffering from addiction does not work and does not help them," Sarubbi said. "Lt. Fisher recognized this I think early on before anyone else had."

Fisher would identify and bring in the person, and Sarubbi would use his contacts to get them into detoxification and then treatment, almost immediately.

Evan Cherry, 25, a former Riverside resident now in a sober living home in Philadelphia, came to Fisher for help in February.

"I was borderline homeless, I had no friends, I had no family that wanted anything to do with me. I wasn't working, I was broke," Cherry recalled. He was facing active warrants for his arrest when he decided to go to a meeting at which Fisher was speaking.

"He could have arrested me right on the spot if he wanted to but he didn't, which is fortunate because I did not want to go to jail," Cherry said.

That exact feeling is what Fisher and Sarubbi have used to encourage those in what is now NJTIP, an official nonprofit, to seek treatment instead of jail.

"With incarceration hanging over their head like the sword of Damocles, it's the ultimate external motivator," Sarubbi said.

He estimated that about 70 to 80 people are involved in the program, from those just entering to those who have graduated. Just three have chosen jail, he said.

Sending patients to treatment instead of putting them behind bars also can save money, according to the "Treatment Instead of Incarceration" primer from the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence — New Jersey. The study, published in 2010, estimated that it cost \$49,000 annually for an inmate in the state, without accounting for the "hidden costs," such as wages, taxable income, fines and child support lost when a person goes to prison. If the state was to instead spend the estimated \$19,000 for inpatient or \$10,000 for outpatient treatment, the state could save about \$30,000, according to the primer.

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It gets easier each time, Jason said of incarceration. Even the withdrawal.

"I know what to expect," he said. "If I'm in the cell that's it, it's over with. Mentally, you kind of accept that fate of knowing you're just going to be sick."

People find ways to make themselves feel better, Jason said. Some take more showers because the hot water helps to loosen the muscles. Some rock themselves to sleep.

"Everyone has their own little thing that they use to help themselves get through it," he said.

In prison, Jason had access to 12-step fellowship meetings such as Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous and drug education classes, but he thought the curriculum was outdated. He would have benefited from more individualized, hands-on treatment,

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Program aims to break 'endless cycle' of addiction and jail

By Kelly Kultys

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RIVERSIDE — Evan Cherry admits that there's a very good chance he should be dead, or at the very least locked up.

In February 2017, Cherry, now 25, was using heroin, facing arrest warrants, was borderline homeless and had no family or friends who wanted him around. He didn't know what to do.

In the back of his mind, he remembered that police officers from the township had tried to encourage him to speak to Lt. Lou Fisher, who, with the help of certified interventionist Michael Sarubbi, had created the New Jersey Treatment Incentive Program, to help people struggling with addiction and facing charges get treatment instead of jail time.

He eventually worked up the courage to attend a meeting Fisher was speaking at.

"He said (he) was really happy that I came to him for help," Cherry recalled. "He keeps tabs on all the drug use in the area so he knew that I was using for a really long time."

Cherry is one of between 70 to 80 people to be a part of the program.

The idea behind the diversion program came to Fisher in 2013 when he began tracking residents who were constantly either getting arrested for crimes to help feed their addiction or getting revived after an overdose. Sarubbi, who had worked in the treatment industry, heard Riverside was struggling with a heroin issue and decided to pitch his services. The pair teamed up and figured out a way to stop cycling people through the system.

"What usually happens is, if you get arrested for theft or for burglary or one of those types of addiction-fueled crimes, you're going into jail — and this was even before bail reform — you'd stay in jail for maybe two weeks, up to a month," Sarubbi said. "You would be detoxed in jail with no treatment, no therapy ... so when they get out they go straight back to using and the next thing you know they're committing crimes again and it's just an endless cycle and that cycle needs to be broken."

Cherry was one of those people looking for another way because jail hadn't helped him.

"I've been in and out of the system," he said.

The day after he spoke to Fisher, Cherry met with him and Sarubbi before they sent him off to Sunrise Detox in Cherry Hill. From there, he was taken to an inpatient program in Pennsylvania where he stayed for four months, followed by six months of intensive outpatient treatment. Cherry's now in the last phase of the program, a sober living home in Philadelphia, while waiting



Evan Cherry, who grew up in Riverside, talks about going through the NJTIP program on his way to recovery from drug addiction. [PHOTOS BY NANCY ROKOS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

for his September court date to get his charges dropped.

TIP lasts about 18 months and includes six months of inpatient treatment, followed by a year of outpatient treatment and sober living. At the end of the program, Fisher appears with the client in court to ask the judge to drop the charges after submitting proof of their recovery.

"The reason we chose 18 months is because some of the clinical people who sit on our board felt that 18 months was a good amount of time for the external motivation to become internal, where now they're not doing it because they want to stay out of jail," Sarubbi said. "They're doing it because their life is improved."

Cherry started to get those feelings around a month into treatment.

"After not being sick for a week, I decided once I leave here I'll continue to get high," he said. "But something happened about 30 days (in) and I kinda grasped the idea, the concept of potentially staying clean. I started actually working with my counselor instead of just going through the motions and telling them what they want to hear and I learned a lot, a lot about myself."

Since then, Cherry said he's had a dramatically different life.

"Now I have a roof over my

head," he said. "I have friends. I have family that wants me around. I have a full-time job and for the first time in 10 years, I'm going back to school."

Rehabilitating people like Cherry has also helped the town, according to Fisher. While the department will be releasing specific data related to the program in the coming weeks, Fisher said they were able to notice an improvement in the crime rate at least partially driven by TIP.

"The year prior to the implementation of TIP, Riverside was ranked 10th in the highest crime in Burlington County and as of 2016, Riverside had one of the lowest crime in Burlington County," Fisher said. "One of the main contributors to the lower crime was that all theft-related crimes are lowered, including burglary."

That's because many of the people committing those crimes were either in treatment or weren't struggling with addiction, Fisher said. The program also has helped keep people like Cherry alive.

"Those guys saved my life," he said. "And I tell them all the time — they don't like to take credit for it, but I mean honestly, if they never did this, I'd be in a whole different situation. I'd probably be dead, but I'd definitely be in jail."



Cherry wears a variety of bracelets from an NJ Recovery event.

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but there aren't enough employees to provide something like that, he said.

"Through all the times I've been in prison I've taken some type of a drug education or some type of treatment, therapeutic-type program," he said. "But it's hard for them, they don't have the time to figure out everybody individually so they find a general theme that can touch a little bit from every person and trying to use that as a guide to doing the right thing. But it doesn't work."

Some of the same programs are available to inmates in the Burlington County Jail, Tosches said, as well as drug education that includes individual and group counseling services. And then once they are out, he said, the jail has partnerships with local organizations including Oaks Integrated Services,

the Salvation Army, Legacy Treatment Centers and Maryville Addiction Treatment Centers, to provide re-entry assistance.

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This time is different, Jason and Sheryl agree.

Spending his 30th birthday in jail marked a turning point.

"I looked back on the last decade and I'm looking at 16 months that I had on the outside out of the last 10 years," he said. "Life in general, as age progresses, it tends to stop giving you things and start taking them away."

It's already started, he said. Several family members on his father's side died while he was behind bars.

"He missed so much out of this decade. He missed his sister's graduation from high school, he missed her graduation from Temple (University). He's missed weddings, he's missed all of these children back here," his mom added, pointing to portraits of her young nieces

and nephews.

A month before Jason was released, Sheryl was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

"I told him look, you have to grow up — you're not 18 anymore, you're going to be 33, you're a man. I need your help," she said.

Jason can't get back the time he missed, but he's been spending a lot more with his family now.

He's been attending activities with friends who are active in 12-step programs. He was able to secure health coverage, and he got a job that he enjoys as a trainer in a local gym.

"They're going to give me a chance," Jason said.

That's been a big barrier in the past. When filling out applications, he's struggled with whether to check the box acknowledging that he's been convicted of a felony. He always asked for an opportunity to explain.

"I would just tell them," he said. "I'm not a bad person — I

couldn't be further from it — I just have a drug problem. That's what it is."

He's been doing well for the last two months, he said, but "all it takes is that one time."

"I know what's going to trigger me. I know what I have to do. It comes down to that choice," he said.

"God forbid, if I ever cross that bridge I would hope that I would be strong enough to just say something and try to nip it right then and there and not let it progress. I know in the past that when that would happen, a lot of it's like a pride thing, like you're embarrassed."

Jason and his family have been down this road before, but he said he feels like he's at a crossroads.

"I could either go right and live the right lifestyle — be there for my family, be a productive member of society. Or, I could go left and I know if I decide to go left that that's going to be my lifestyle," he said. "This is kind of it."

Addiction and incarceration

Nearly half (81,900) of federal prisoners in the United States had been sentenced for drug offenses at the end of September 2016. More than 99 percent of the offenses were for trafficking.



Drug offenses at the state level

About 15 percent (197,200) of inmates in state correctional facilities across the country at the end of 2015 had been convicted of a drug offense as their most serious crime. In New Jersey, the percentage was slightly lower at the beginning of this year.



Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners in 2016 report and New Jersey Department of Corrections, Offender statistics as of Jan. 9, 2018.

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