

# Bangor Daily News

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## DRUG TREATMENT IS STILL A SOURCE OF HOPE

Gov. Paul LePage threw out a startling statistic at Tuesday's town hall meeting in Portland — 90 percent of those addicted to heroin die as a result of their addiction. Although the governor's number was an exaggeration, the real number — 50 percent die prematurely — is just as shocking and should galvanize support to do more to fight addiction.

This jarring number doesn't mean, as the governor suggested, that treatment is hopeless. Instead, it's a reminder that quality treatment must be readily and consistently available.

Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, followed people with heroin addictions for 33 years, from 1964 to 1997. By 1997, half the study participants — all men with criminal convictions — had died. This death rate was up to 100 percent higher than the overall death rate among men of the same age. The average age of study group survivors in 1997 was 57.4 years.

The most common cause of death (for nearly 22 percent) was a drug overdose, most often heroin. Liver disease and cancer also were common, as were homicides, suicides and accidents.

The governor used the high heroin death rate as a reason not to focus on treatment. But this attitude makes addiction hopeless, effectively a death sentence for many. It diminishes the value of people such as Nick St. Louis, who shared the story of his addiction and recovery at a forum in Bangor earlier this week.

To be sure, treatment isn't a cure, but it can be a path back to normalcy — a job, family life, social engagement. Too often, though, there are waitlists for treatment, and lawmakers have imposed caps on the duration of common substance abuse treatments for low-income Mainers.

The UCLA study shows that treatment is a long, incremental process prone to setbacks. Of the survivors, nearly half — 47 percent — reported abstinence of five years or more in 1997. But a quarter still returned to heroin use, even after 15 years of abstinence.

In theory, stopping the flow of heroin into Maine would be the most effective way to end its use. But as the country's decades-long war on drugs shows, there is no way to completely stop the flow of drugs, and history shows that when one drug is hard to get, ad-

dicts switch to another. Reducing the demand for heroin and other drugs by treating people who are addicted to them must be the focus of any plan.

After weeks of LePage demanding more drug enforcement agents — and threatening to call on the National Guard if he didn't get them — legislative leaders have agreed to push for funding for 10 new agents as part of a \$4.8 million plan to address Maine's heroin crisis. LePage also issued a financial order authorizing additional funds for the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency so it can expedite the new hires. Of the four new agents funded by the state budget approved in late June, the MDEA so far has hired one.

Acquiescing to LePage's demand for more agents gives lawmakers more leeway to delve into Maine's heroin crisis with a focus on prevention and treatment, which State House leaders pledged to do Wednesday in announcing their \$4.8 million plan. In addition to the drug agents, the plan — crafted by Republican Senate President Michael Thibodeau, Democratic House Speaker Mark Eves and Democratic Sen. Justin Alford — calls for a new detox center in Bangor and more peer-to-peer counseling centers.

As a proactive measure, Maine policymakers need to address how the high usage of prescription painkillers in the state contributes to the heroin epidemic. There is increasing evidence that abuse of prescription opioids is a precursor to heroin use.

In 2012, Maine and New Hampshire had the highest rates per person for high-dose painkiller prescriptions. Data from Maine's Prescription Monitoring Program show that prescription painkiller use rose from 2006 to 2010, with the largest rise among Schedule II drugs, those most likely to lead to addiction.

Prescribers are using the monitoring program to track — and, if necessary, limit or stop — overuse of controlled substances. In a recent survey, one-third of the program's users said they had referred a patient to substance abuse treatment based on prescribing information in the database.

Sadly, we know that more people will die in the coming months because of their heroin addictions. But it's critical that no one accepts that fact as something that can't change.

## OTHER VOICES

### CHINA'S INFLUENCE IN AFRICA

China is making a major push for influence in Africa, through trade and investment and its first overseas military base. India is also interested in the African market.

Both developments bear watching by the United States and Europe.

At a trade summit last Friday in Johannesburg, South Africa, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged \$60 billion not only in investment, but also in health, agriculture and infrastructure aid. His offer will be welcome to African nations, particularly those that had been riding high on their oil wealth before world prices dropped.

China is capable of providing African markets with inexpensive, necessary consumer items in return for commodities such as copper and iron ore. At the same time, its rollout of aid is not new. In the 1970s, for instance, it built the Tanzam railroad, from the Tanzanian port of Dar-es-Salaam on the Indian

Ocean to Zambia's copper belt.

The Asian giant has also announced its intention to establish a military base in Djibouti, a former French colony in northeast Africa along the Red Sea. It will be Beijing's first overseas base, perched on the edge of the Middle East. It will join America's only base in Africa, also in Djibouti, where thousands of U.S. troops, fighter-bombers and a drone operation are located. France and Japan also have bases there.

The United States has never shown itself capable of competing well for a significant economic role in Africa. It always lagged behind former colonial powers France, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Italy and Belgium. This inability has been a policy shortfall for America.

Now the Chinese are gaining influence on the continent. Regardless of whether an aggressive India becomes a competitor, too, the Americans and the Europeans must keep close tabs on the situation.

*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (Dec. 7)*



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Climate change routine

Why is Greenland called Greenland? Because sometime in the past, it was lush with green vegetation, trees, shrubs, grass and other plants, not the ice cube it is today. It had a human population that lived and grew crops; mostly fishermen and maybe Vikings and Norsemen. It wasn't always the ice cube it is today.

Christopher Columbus came to America looking for a way to India and China. Samuel de Champlain, Jacques Cartier, Henry Hudson and other explorers from Europe came to North America looking for the rumored Northwest Passage that in the past may have been open to navigation and not the sheet of ice that confronted them.

So what is unusual for the melting of the ice in the arctic? Nothing. Ice ages have come and gone. Global warming and cooling has been going on forever. The only thing different is its inconvenience to humans. I guess Mother Nature doesn't care.

**Frederick Ashmore**  
*Hancock*

### Guns are answer

Alex Steed's Dec. 4 column blaming the National Rifle Association for mass shootings was a blatant case of shoot the messenger. He needs to understand some basic facts.

First, laws have not and will not stop deadly crime, so the only way to stop criminals is with deadly force.

Second, America's greatness is a direct result of individual initiative. Because police on all levels now admit they cannot

protect everyone, the only logical solution to mass shootings is more individuals arming themselves and to concealed carry. If mass killers knew that every group, even church meetings and schools, had armed people present, how many mass shootings do you think we would see? Very few.

Third, all of our cyber gadgets haven't changed America. It's still the Wild West. To blame the NRA for reminding us of this fact is ridiculous. I don't see anyone trying to haul automakers into court because their vehicles kill thousands of people annually. The NRA is one of the few organizations defending Americans' right to keep and bear arms.

Steed laments that his daughter isn't safe in her school. How about getting a drive together to install armed guards? After the Sandy Hook massacre, how could any parent allow their kids to attend a school without armed guards? Wake up, dude. It's time for him to unpack his guns and his backbone.

**Peter W. Earl**  
*Fort Fairfield*

### WRITE TO US

Letters must be 250 words or fewer and include a full name, town of residence and daytime phone number. OpEds may be 700 words. Letters may be edited or rejected for clarity, taste, libel and space. If a letter or OpEd is published, submissions by the same writer will not be considered for 60 days.

**Letters** may be sent to letters@bangordailynews.com. **OpEds** may be sent to OpEd@bangordailynews.com or P.O. Box 1329, Bangor, ME 04402-1329.

### DHHS oversight

It is apparent that Maine Department of Health and Human Services Commissioner Mary Mayhew, an early appointee of Gov. Paul LePage, was named to the position in order to defund, dismantle and obstruct the work of the department she heads.

Her statement, repeated in the Dec. 8 Bangor Daily News editorial about the problems at Riverview, in which she calls the idea that commissioners should expect to be at the "beck and call" of the Legislature's Government Oversight Committee "ludicrous" is one example of her arrogance and disdain for the legislative process and the importance of the balance of power. Both she and the governor have lost sight of the fact that "we the people" are their bosses and that the legislative committee has a duty to be informed to protect our interests.

This bureaucrat is unresponsive to all but the governor's wishes, and LePage is unresponsive to the wishes of the people of Maine. I refer not just to those who voted for him but also to the majority of those of us who didn't. To hold hostage bonds authorized by a large majority of Maine voters until the Legislature approves his pet projects is blackmail. To exert political pressure that causes individuals to lose positions, as he has done in several instances (Good Will-Hinckley and the community college system, for example), raises the act of bullying to a fine art.

This sort of disrespect for the residents of Maine and their representatives should not stand.

**Shirley Jarvella**  
*Northport*

## .COMMENTS

**BDN writer Christopher Cousins, "Maine lawmakers propose \$4.8M plan to combat drug addiction":**

Glad to see the governor, the speaker and the Senate president all reading the same book. I won't go out on a limb and say they're on the same page, but at least this is a start.

— *Warren Spaulding*

Cops are the worst thing you can do to prevent drug abuse. They do not have any of the skills required to help addicts. They drive abusers underground, where they cannot get the help they need. We need a total reboot on this. No more law enforcement failures. Let's try treating this as a public health problem.

— *Plutocracy*

Do they know how long it will take to catch the people that are

bringing drugs into Maine? It's going to take months. Now, if they do catch them, other people will take their place because those people are paid very well to haul drugs.

— *wollydevil*

Yes, 10 more agents to catch all the out-of-staters bringing the garbage into the state are welcome but this bill is really light on the treatment side. I would guess 100 beds right now would not be enough to address the problem. Drug courts would be a nice add, too. Treatment should be about getting completely off drugs, not substituting a legal drug for years for an illegal one.

— *Mefrfiter*

This is always the political leaders' solution. They refuse to look at some of the policies that have been successful in Europe. It ends up costing more

money to house low-level addicts in prison that is does to treat them.

— *hilltopper*

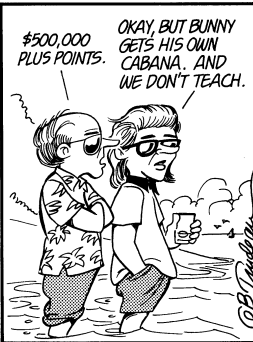
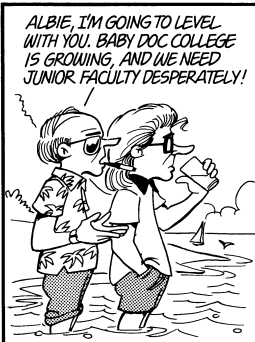
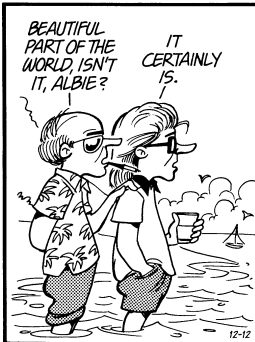
Throw more money at it. That will fix it. It sure has worked wonders in the past. I wonder how long the people of this state and country will put up with this war on drugs ruse? Does anyone think they actually want to reduce the number of people using drugs and going in and out of the prison system? Much like the health care industry in this country, there's very little money to be made by actually curing any of these problems.

— *Bubba Hotep*

Ten new agents, watching our borders for future shipments of drugs and peddlers of drugs coming into our state, is better than no new agents at all.

— *maineilove*

## DOONESBURY



## GARRY TRUDEAU