

Addiction treatment specialist has helped people for 30 years

BY NICK MCCREA
OF THE NEWS STAFF

BANGOR, Maine — In describing Maine’s battle against addiction, treatment specialist Patricia Kimball borrows from Charles Dickens.

“It’s the best of times; it’s the worst of times. It really is,” Kimball said. “For the first time in a long time, [substance abuse treatment] is everybody’s top issue.”

Kimball, 65, of Hermon is retiring at the start of September after 15 years as executive director of Wellspring Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services. The organization operates residential halfway houses for men and women, as well as outpatient services for people struggling with addiction and mental health problems.

She has been a longtime advocate for those struggling with addiction, and she has guided one of the state’s few remaining residential rehabilitation programs through countless changes in state policy and treatment methods. Also, she is president of the Maine Association of Substance Abuse Programs.

Her retirement comes as the Bangor area continues to struggle with an opioid abuse problem that has reached crisis level. She said it’s time to work less, spend more time with friends and family and determine what are her next steps.

“I could never just walk away from this work,” she said. “I will just use another path.”

Kimball joined Well-

spring in her early 30s as an intern while returning to college to become a substance abuse counselor. Her father struggled with alcoholism after returning from World War II, and his struggle continued throughout her childhood, deeply affecting her family. He joined Alcoholics Anonymous when Kimball was a teenager and lived the last 25 years of his life sober. That sparked Kimball’s interest in helping others overcome addiction.

“My family had a gift: It got to heal. Our family got to recover,” Kimball said during an interview at Wellspring’s Hammond Street offices. “When I got into this field, it really was about feeling like I needed to pay it forward.”

Two years ago, Bangor leaders formed the Community Health Leadership Board, a group that brought the heads of area hospitals and substance abuse organizations together with law enforcement officials and local lawmakers. Kimball points to this group as one of the keys to bringing the issue of substance abuse to the forefront, and consulted with the group regularly on treatment issues.

“They knew this community was greatly affected by substance abuse disorders. And they knew they had to face it head on,” Kimball said. “That is to be admired.”

Some of the board’s recommendations have been implemented.

For example, the group sparked a call for a residential detoxification facility

in the area. That proposal received state funding and is in the works. The Maine Department of Health and Human Services has issued requests for proposals to start the facility sometime next year, likely in the Bangor area. Wellspring could be among those applicants, Kimball said.

The board has called for revival of the Penobscot County drug court, which could be relaunched by next year after being shuttered for five years. The goal of a drug court is to reroute eligible people charged with drug-related crimes to treatment programs rather than the overcrowded jail system.

The community board also advocates spreading medication-assisted treatment into rural areas so addicts don’t have to travel as far. Legislation to do that has not passed, though. It also advocated for Medicaid expansion to give more uninsured people a chance to seek treatment. The Medicaid fight has been politically and economically contentious, and it has failed to gain traction.

Mary Prybylo, the CEO of Bangor’s St. Joseph Healthcare and vice chairwoman of the Community Health Leadership Board, describes Kimball as “collaborative, persistent and resilient.”

“She’s the ultimate collaborator, in trying to work with people in the community, state and other agencies, to make sure that the people who have the disease of substance use disorder are getting the absolute best that they can,” Prybylo said. Kimball said she still



GABOR DEGRE/BDN

Patricia Kimball is retiring after 30 years working with people struggling with addiction.

sees stigma surrounding addiction and treatment and, as an example, cited the Bangor City Council’s recent rejection of a methadone treatment facility’s expansion bid. She said that decision was “built on fear” of increased crime and its potential effect on the city budget “rather than truly looking at the importance of the availability of medication-assisted treatment.”

City councilors who blocked the expansion said the clinic failed to prove that potential patients would be best served in Bangor as opposed to somewhere else.

Medication-assisted treatments, such as methadone and Suboxone, have faced high hurdles and intense scrutiny in recent years. Wellspring doesn’t adminis-

ter these medications, but does refer people in its programs to those services.

The state has reduced the reimbursement rate for organizations that use methadone to treat opioid patients. And Gov. Paul LePage has said he’s working to shut down methadone clinics. Kimball said such rhetoric harms people working to recover from substance abuse. “I often feel like we’re fighting each other instead of working together,” Kimball said. “The planning hasn’t been able to keep up with the incredible need, and that’s the problem. The more we talk about it, the more people are going to come out and ask for help.”

Wellspring currently has a 40-person waitlist for its 28-bed residential program. Kimball also credits the

state’s congressional delegation for trying to tackle this issue. U.S. Sen. Angus King and U.S. Rep. Bruce Poliquin have each hosted community events focused on substance abuse over the past several months, helping to drive the conversation.

Kimball said that after retirement she will continue to push for treatment options that are “quick, affordable and attainable.” She said she also might consider running for the Legislature.

Wellspring has hired Suzanne Farley, who has a long background working in child welfare and with foster families in Maine and New Mexico, to take Wellspring’s reins. Kimball and Farley have been working side-by-side over the past two months to prepare for the transition.

Bangor announces renaming of Essex Street Overpass

The city of Bangor announced recently that the Essex Street I-95 Overpass Bridge will be renamed the Brent Cross Bridge, in honor of lifelong Bangorian, Brent Cross.

City Councilor Joe Perry testified in February before the Maine House of Representatives Transportation Committee in support of the renaming where it was passed

by the legislature. The Essex Street Overpass Bridge was one Cross used frequently during his regular travel.

Cross was an active and well-known member of the Bangor community who worked hard to improve the city through volunteerism, outreach and resources. He was a member of several organizations, including founding president of the Bangor Breakfast Rotary and inductee of the Husson Business Hall of Fame. He happily represented and advocated for Bangor and for the entire

state of Maine during his travels. He was a great example of the values that the citizens of Bangor are about – he was family oriented, responsible, helpful, giving and a great neighbor and friend.

Cross was well liked and respected, built lasting relationships, and was a true ambassador for the Bangor area. The renaming ceremony will be held at 10:30 a.m. Friday, Aug. 26, at the bridge. Attendees are instructed to park at Redeemer Lutheran Church, 540 Essex St.

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