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COMMUNITY NEWS

Prescription drug addiction spreading in the community

By Samer Hijazi and Ali Harb | Thursday, 01.28.2016, 09:19 PM



DEARBORN — This year has been a rough start for many families in the Arab American community, due to the untimely deaths of several young adult men.

It seems every few days, social media pages are announcing the disheartening news — another young Arab male has tragically passed away.

The majority of the community tends to show an outpouring of condolences to those who were close to the deceased. Community members often suggest that prayers and privacy should immediately be granted to the mourning families.

But this pattern of deaths has opened the eyes of many throughout metro Detroit.

"All these young men are being found dead in Dearborn. What's going on there?" asked one person on social media.

Without mentioning any names or incidents, The Arab American News can confirm many of these deaths have been linked to prescription drug overdoses.

Some of these young men had been battling addiction for many years. In some cases, both family members and friends were aware of their struggles. Yet, they continued their downward spiral until it was too late for anyone to intervene.

Awareness campaign

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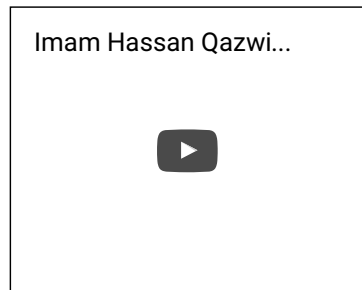


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Ghada Abdallah, a local pharmacist who recently became the first Arab American woman to be elected onto the Michigan Pharmacists Association Board, is launching a new campaign titled "End the Silence Now," to bring awareness of prescription drug abuse to the community.

Abdallah is in the process of collaborating with local organizations, hospitals and mosques to launch a coordinated effort that brings the issue to the forefront.

Abdallah said young adults in the community are battling addiction with drugs such as Adderall, Norco, Oxycodone, Morphine, muscle relaxers, cough syrup and Xanax. Many of these drugs are a gateway to heroin.

The pharmacist said the stigma in addressing such issues in the Arab American community is further driving individuals to become addicts.

"In Arab American families... they just don't know how to deal with it," Abdallah said. "It's just embarrassing. But even so, in many cases everyone in the family knows and they end up becoming enablers for the person."

Abdallah cited an example of a family that's aware of their son's addiction to prescription pills. The addict doesn't work or go to school and is spending every last penny on drugs.

"He will spend all his money on drugs and the family will still shelter him and feed him," Abdallah said. "Nobody says 'I'm contributing to his downfall.' They just think 'haram let me help him.' We really need to learn about this disease. We shouldn't be contributing to these behaviors, where we are enabling the addiction."

Abdallah noted that the current Arab American culture is similar to how mainstream American culture was 50 years ago, due to language and cultural barriers between immigrant parents and their U.S.-born children.

"There's a disconnect between the immigrants and the people who were born here," Abdallah said. "You have a different set of values than your parents. This creates a gap between the parents and their children. We have a new perspective on things and that's where the disconnect is."

The Arab American News often experiences backlash from community members whenever a death related to a drug overdose or mental illness is reported. Some local Arabs often feel that such issues are family affairs that should be dealt with behind closed doors, not talked about openly.

Abdallah said the campaign is titled "End the Silence Now" for that very reason. A large portion of her campaign will focus on relaying a message to the mosques to educate parents on methods to communicate with their children more openly.

She added that the string of deaths recently in the Dearborn-Dearborn Heights community related to drug overdose should be a wake up call.

An epidemic

The Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention describes the addiction to prescription painkillers as an epidemic.

"Since 1999, the amount of prescription painkillers prescribed and sold in the U.S. has nearly quadrupled, yet there has not been an overall change in the amount of pain that Americans report," the CDC states. "Overprescribing leads to more abuse and more overdose deaths."

According to the CDC, 7,000 people are treated in emergency departments daily for misusing painkillers.

"Taking too many prescription painkillers can stop a person's breathing—leading to death," a CDC report reads.

Dr. Sam Fawaz said the level is even more alarming in the Arab American community.

"I do believe in Dearborn there is a higher than average narcotic abuse rate than the surrounding area," he said.

Fawaz bemoaned the lack of state and federal oversight on potentially addictive narcotic drugs and urged doctors and pharmacists "to be on guard" when prescribing and dispensing such medicine.

"There are red flags that are being overlooked," Fawaz said, without explicitly criticizing the community's doctors.

He added that some patients are being prescribed up to 120 tablets of narcotic drugs monthly.

According to Fawaz, it is difficult to take that amount of medicine, which means some of these pills are being sold or consumed for recreational purposes.

He said having intervention and rehab centers are not enough if the people do not seek help and that community members often sweep drug problems under the rug in order to avoid the shame associated with the issue.

"Families need to own up to this, to have the courage and identify the problem and get the children the help they need," he said.

Fawaz encouraged sympathy for those struggling with drugs, asking people not to judge them.

Mona Makk, director of the Community Health and Research Center at ACCESS, said there is a huge problem with drug abuse in the community.

She said the addiction stigma and lack of education about the dangerous use of opioid medicines are contributing to the issue.

"I believe one of the biggest issue is the fear of being judged, fear of being not accepted, fear of being discriminated against," she said.

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Makki advised relatives of addicts to get them help as soon as possible. She added that denial of the problem could turn lethal.

"The sooner that someone seeks treatment, the better someone will be," she said. "Waiting around might have life-threatening consequences."

Makki said ACCESS has a substance abuse prevention program and mental health programs that addresses addictions.

"All our staff are culturally competent and bilingual," she said.

Makki stressed that all clients' information remain confidential, in accordance with federal guidelines. She said discussing patients' records in the community by the staff could be cause for termination.

"That's one thing that we do not tolerate as an agency," she said.

She said that those seeking help do not have to worry about being seen frequenting ACCESS' center because the organization has more than 100 programs that provide multiple services in many areas.

By Samer Hijazi and Ali Harb

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