

  
**Tompkins County**  
**COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES BOARD**

Tompkins County Mental Health Center  
201 East Green Street  
Ithaca, New York 14850-5421

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Mental Health Subcommittee

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Substance Use Subcommittee

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**Tompkins County Community Mental Health Services Board**

**March 7, 2022, 5:30 p.m.**

**Meeting Minutes**

Approved 4.4.2022

Via Zoom

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkpJNVbpLLbEbhoDbTIEgSQ>

**Present:** Dr. Maria Morog; Ellice Switzer; Mary Hutchens; Jan Lynch; Paula Winner; Dr. Auguste Duplan; Sheila McEnery; Larry Roberts; Stu Bergman; Paula Winner; and Travis Winter;

**Excused:** Khaki Wunderlich; Sullymar Pena Vazquez

**Guests:** Jessica Janssen, CARS; Katarina Wehmeyer, CARS; Angela Sullivan, ADC; Helen Kaplan, ADC; Dr. John Paul, CARS and ADC; Samantha Stevenson, REACH Medical; Veronica Pillar, TC ; Shawna Black, TC; Marley Brook; and AJ Kircher.

**Staff:** Frank Kruppa, Commissioner; Harmony Ayers-Friedlander, DCS; Samantha Hillson, TCPIC; and Karan Palazzo, LGU Administrative Assistant

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The meeting was called to order at 5:30 pm by Maria Morog, Chair. Motion to approve the February 2022 minutes; Ms. Winner 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> by Ms. Lynch. All were in favor.

**Privilege of the Floor:** None

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**Announcements:** Ms. Winner announced she will be moving to NYC and will have to give up her seat on the CSB in June 2022.

**Fentanyl-Laced Drug Discussion:**

Ms. Lynch warmly introduced Ms. AJ Kircher as a long-time resident of Tompkins County, a former CSB member, and currently an executive director in Elmira, NY. She has directed services for people with mental health, substance use, developmental and intellectual disabilities. She is here to share her story of the untimely death of her 23 y/o son, who passed away in July 2021 from a fentanyl-laced drug.

Ms. Kircher, shared her son's story with strong grief as his passing has not been a year yet. She said that the situation of her son Jared overdosing never sat right with her and she believes the wrong terminology was used. She said he was unlikely to overdose as he was a recreational drug user of cocaine and was recently discharged from an in-treatment facility. She said that he was a low level user who frequently fell under the radar for many agencies and believes it was his first slip up out of rehab.

Ms. Kircher said that she found a lot of stigma around overdosing, substance use, and addiction in losing her son. Since his passing, she has met with many mothers who have had similar situations, and they refuse to admit it publicly because of the stigma and shame. She joined local support groups for bereaved parents and met many parents who lost their children when they reached out for a drug they were unfamiliar with. As Jared, too, became a victim of the "pressed pill epidemic/man made pandemic". She believes it is growing, connected to violence, and a lot of money is involved.

Ms. Kircher shared a brief history of Jared's life. At the age of 17 Jared lost his longtime girlfriend to brain cancer and started using recreational drugs. Jared was connected to counseling to work through his grief as he was becoming more isolated and

his use increased to cocaine. She said Jared utilized many of the services of agencies in representation tonight. She felt Jared needed cross-system collaboration to include mental health issues along with his addiction and grief as she communicated this with all the agencies he serviced; even after turning 18; she did not stop.

Ms. Kircher shared that there was a constant fear for Jared's future from 2018 – 2020, then COVID came. A bright day when Jared decided he was ready to go treatment. With the help of her daughter, Marley, a treatment center was found within 6 hours in Massachusetts. He stayed there for 4 ½ months but abruptly left.

Jared's return to Ithaca was initially excellent but he soon realized full sobriety was not for him and begins smoking and drinking but not close to his addiction of his cocaine use. In June 2021 there was a celebration of "Jared Style Sobriety" on Cayuga Lake. He was working construction, had a new girlfriend but all eyes stayed on him. Soon after the celebration he was found unresponsive with vitals but could not be revived. She was confused about the substances in the toxicology report and called upon some medical professional friends to help get some answers. Percocet was not found in Jared's body.

In her research, she found that Jared used an app called "Signal", to score Percocet, which was out of the norm. Ms. Kircher understands that the police are to test the substance on the spot, which did not happen. In her research she found that there were four other overdoses on that same day, but the other overdoses responded positively to NARCAN. She recently found out that the month of July 2021 there were 8 fatal overdoses in total. She said, "The community must be alerted".

Ms. Kircher believes combing prevention, treatment, intervention and prosecution will win the battle.

Ms. Kircher asks, what is next? How do we know how we are working together? What are we doing about trends such as manufactured pills? What do we have to do? What can we do to prevent other parents from experiencing these situations?

Marley Brooks, Jared's sister, who is pursuing a career in substance use and recovery, shared that fentanyl is affecting our community and drug sellers must be held accountable; recreational drug use is strong in the community which includes the colleges; there are many roadblocks for people seeking treatment; mental health issues and substance use overlap.

Ms. Kircher shared two beautiful pictures of Jared and was thankful for the opportunity to dialogue.

### **Agency Representation:**

#### CARS

Jessica Janssen, CEO of CARS – Agencies must do better in providing updated data to staff and patients. In preparation for this meeting she asked her counseling team what they are seeing from their patient's perspective and what the counselors are most concerned about.

#### Patients report:

- A tolerance developing with the fentanyl laced drugs
- Getting addicted quicker with a harder time controlling their use
- Patients feel an acceleration of the opioid use disorders (from mild to severe)
- Patients are reporting that they feel they are moving into addiction in shorter periods of time
- A rise in secondary dependence on fentanyl
- Patients report struggles with the pandemic and has increased their need or want for substances

#### Counselors concerns:

- Increased demand for NARCAN
- Promoting NARCAN to patients, staff and community
- Providing fentanyl strips
- Encouraging patients to take NARCAN with them

Katrina Wehmeyer, Opioid Treatment Nurse of CARS – Ms. Wehmeyer added that everyone is testing positive for fentanyl. Clients report difficulty being successful at getting on sub Oxone on their own; huge increase in poly substance use since the pandemic; overdoses seem to be after shorter term treatment detox stays; hopeful with switch to methadone to help people to reduce their fentanyl use; improving same day admissions; lack of dual diagnosis programs locally.

Alcohol & Drug Council

Angela Sullivan, Executive Director of Alcohol & Drug Council - Ms. Sullivan shared that ADC focuses on integrated treatment. Since 2013 the entire staff was certified in training but are not fully licensed in mental health and substance use. She apologized for Jared's experience with ADC. She added that ADC will have a detox and stabilization facility on Triphammer Road which is part of a three-part program where people will have 24/7 access to care, when they are ready, where they are. They are moving forward and looking for the integrated license.

Dr. John-Paul Meade, Medical Director of Alcohol & Drug Council – Dr. John-Paul Meade added that he sees this as a priority and we must increase messaging, obtain more data and research for more funding.

Ms. Helen Kaplan, ADC – Ms. Kaplan added that ADC is committed to supporting and doing better together.

Ms. Sullivan added that Assemblywoman introduced a bill to have a single agency doing mental health and substance use services under one roof.

REACH Medical

Ms. Samantha Stevenson, Director of Operations at REACH Medical - Ms. Stevenson shared her hope to come together as service providers to have tangible outcomes. REACH recently hired an entire case management team so that every patient gets assigned a case manager as they realized gaps in care. The workflow around the same day intakes for treatment is completed although they are an outpatient facility.

Ms. Kircher asked how we can find out how many overdoses daily.

Mr. Kruppa responded that there is a state notification system when there is a spike in emergency room overdoses that comes through the health department. In general, spikes are two or three overdoses because our numbers are still very low, and that data is delayed a couple of days. Law enforcement knows first as they are responding to them. The process needs to be readdressed. Mr. Kruppa said that there is no depository and at this time there's no actual way to access daily overdoses.

Ms. Switzer's summarization of the fentanyl-laced drug discussion:

1. A better job by all involved
2. Develop systems for data collection and analysis that crosses systems to be reviewed on a regular basis
3. Develop public health messaging strategies around fentanyl poisoning targeting recreational drug users
4. Integration of services
5. Address the criminal activity and its connection to incidents of fentanyl poisoning in Tompkins County

Dr. Morog thanked all the guests for contributing their personal and professional stories and expertise. She feels it was helpful and productive.

There being no further business, Ms. McEnery motioned to adjourn, 2<sup>nd</sup> by Ms. Switzer; all in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 7:00 pm.



**The Next Community Mental Health Services Board Meeting  
is April 4, 2022, at 5:30 pm.**