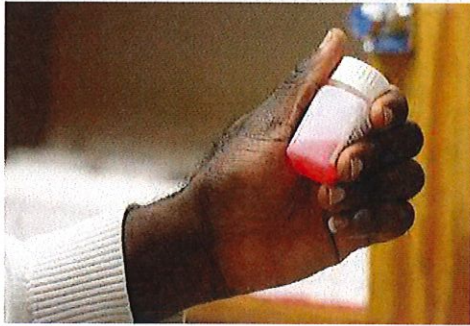


## Amid opioid crisis, Mount Pleasant police first in SC to launch recovery-focused program

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Ed Anderson dispenses doses of methadone at the Charleston Center in 2017. A new program spearheaded by the Mount Pleasant Police Department strives to get people who have overdosed on opioids connected with treatment and other resources for recovery. File/Grace Beahm Alford/Staff  
By Grace Beahm Alford [gbeahm@postandcourier.com](mailto:gbeahm@postandcourier.com)

After wrestling with her 30-year-old son's heroin addiction for more than two years, Melissa Kersey finally found help from an unlikely source: a police officer.

It was right after her son's third overdose. A renewed sense of urgency fueled the Mount Pleasant mother's desperate search for treatment. If she didn't find something, she thought, her son might not survive.

By then, Kersey had been disappointed by sober living homes that helped her son quit heroin cold turkey for a while but didn't address his depression and anxiety. The treatment centers she'd called expected her to shell out tens of thousands of dollars a month. Hours spent scouring the internet only left her more confused about how to help her son begin recovery.

That was until May, when Mount Pleasant Police Sgt. Tony Winstead asked to meet with Kersey as part of a new program called First Step. The initiative is led by Mount Pleasant officers and victims' advocates who work to connect opioid users and their families with wraparound recovery services after an overdose.

[https://www.postandcourier.com/news/amid-opioid-crisis-mount-pleasant-police-first-in-sc-to/article\\_0b5a869c-861b-11e8-8709-b7b231fe8d4e.html](https://www.postandcourier.com/news/amid-opioid-crisis-mount-pleasant-police-first-in-sc-to/article_0b5a869c-861b-11e8-8709-b7b231fe8d4e.html)



Winstead gave Kersey information about family support groups and he urged her to buy the overdose-reversing drug naloxone. He gradually helped get her son into the Charleston Center, the county's substance abuse prevention and treatment program, where the young man is receiving **medication-assisted treatment** and counseling.

"You get to the end of your rope and you don't know where to turn. ... The best thing he asked me was what I wanted to do," Kersey said of Winstead. "I know many parents don't get asked that. You get told what you should be doing, what you haven't done."

First Step began in earnest in July and has helped four users and two sets of parents. Three of the people have sought treatment at the Charleston Center, and one person is at an inpatient facility for long-term treatment, Winstead said. The parents have been connected with a local addiction therapist.

This community-wide collaboration spearheaded by police is said to be the first of its kind in South Carolina. It comes at a time when state agencies and stakeholders are trying to fill gaps in resources for people addicted to opioids. Declared a **public health emergency** by Gov. Henry McMaster in December, opioid deaths in the Palmetto State increased by 21 percent from 2014 to 2016.

Charleston County's opioid overdose deaths rank the second-highest in the state, **after Horry County**.

Sara Goldsby, director of the S.C. Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services, hopes other jurisdictions will look to First Step as a model.

"We're still coming out of a long history of criminalizing substance abuse instead of addressing it like a disease," she said. "In a way, a program like this is a shift in practice and protocol."



Winstead said First Step isn't a "get out of jail free card." People who possess illegal substances are still subject to the law.

But he said the initiative represents a new way of operating for the police department. In the past, officers would respond to an overdose and accompany the patient to the hospital. Their involvement typically ended after the person reached the emergency room.

Now Winstead wants to assure there's follow-through for users and their loved ones.

"We don't expect everybody to want treatment or want help, but as long as we can help somebody — especially the families," he said.

### **Help for families**

First Step was the culmination of six months of conversations prompted by a rise in overdoses in Mount Pleasant in the past few years. Police Chief Carl Ritchie wanted his department to start a program to help the community, so Winstead turned to local partners — therapists, interventionists, advocates and treatment providers — to train a team of two officers and three victims' advocates.

After a person has overdosed and before they're released from an emergency room, an officer and an advocate intervene with information about resources. They offer to take the person to the Charleston Center or other treatment services. If the person declines, they follow-up in 48 hours.

Advocates with First Step place a strong emphasis on families, the loved ones of opioid users who are often isolated by a disease that wreaks havoc on many aspects of their lives.

Winstead, a former supervisor of the department's narcotics unit who's now in charge of criminal investigations, said he didn't understand how addiction affects families until he attended a national opioid conference earlier this year.



"I learned that the families have no idea what resources are out there. There's not one single clearinghouse of information," he said.

**FAVOR Greenville**, an addiction recovery program serving the Upstate, has developed a model that emphasizes family involvement during recovery. Rich Jones, the group's CEO, trained First Step advocates and officers how to establish a rapport with families. Among the most important skills, he said, is the ability for advocates to bring patience and clarity to an overwhelming situation.

"If you're a person dealing with addiction and your loved one is in a crisis ... it's very hard to think clearly," Jones said. "Your rational thinking goes away and you're driven by fear and anxiety. You don't know who to call. You Google it on internet and get all kinds of bad advice. What the family advocate does is basically helps the person put together a plan."

Nanci Steadman Shipman of Mount Pleasant said the community wasn't talking openly about opioid treatment and recovery resources in 2016 when her son Creighton Shipman died of a heroin overdose at age 19.

"Something we thought was super important to get away from was the isolation," she said.

Steadman Shipman is the executive director of **Wake Up Carolina**, a nonprofit with a mission to end substance abuse. Her recovery community, Creighton's House, recently launched weekly support groups for young people ages 14-25.

Winstead worked closely with Steadman Shipman to create First Step.

"I felt very much alone in 2016. And my family did, too," she said. "There are resources now in place that are readily available ... to make this a long-term commitment of recovery."

### **A lifesaver**



Kersey was skeptical at first about the idea of a police officer helping her and her son. Her doubt eased when she realized that Winstead was equipped with a bevy of contacts and wanted to help them throughout the process.

She said Winstead encouraged her to have a conversation with her son to let him know she understood heroin's tight grip and that he couldn't "just stop" using. That talk, compared with other exchanges that had escalated into screaming matches, helped the mother and son develop trust, she said.

Some of their best conversations now play out in the car on their morning drives to the Charleston Center, where Kersey's son has been receiving outpatient treatment for one month. It was during one of those talks that he told her the First Step program probably saved his life.

"I knew he would not last long if I didn't find the right fit for him. He kind of knew that, too," she said.

Kersey acknowledges that her son's current treatment regimen might not be what helps him find long-term sobriety. If it doesn't work out, she knows she can dial Winstead's number and he'll help them find another option.

## **Opioid overdose deaths**

### **Charleston County:**

2014: 41

2015: 58

2016: 65

### **South Carolina:**

2014: 508

2015: 565

2016: 616