

## **Expert: Worcester strained from overdose rate, housing shortage**

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Henry Schwan, Worcester Telegram & Gazette

WORCESTER – When Dr. Matilde Castiel recently presented the latest drug overdose and homeless numbers in Worcester to the city’s Board of Health, she stressed the link between the two public health challenges.

Castiel is the city’s commissioner of Health and Human Services and she shared some sobering developments. One was that of all the counties in Massachusetts, Worcester County had the biggest jump in opioid-related overdose deaths, an 18% increase, between 2021 (281 deaths) to 2022 (331 deaths). Plus, the city’s red-hot housing market had a 1.7% apartment vacancy rate in May, the second-lowest in the country at the time.

Mix in skyrocketing rents from \$1,100 monthly eight years ago to nearly \$2,000 monthly today and there seems to be a perfect storm of factors contributing to Worcester’s growing overdose and homeless problems.

### **Drug overdose numbers in Main South**

That is the big picture, but it also gets granular, as Castiel noted the Main South area is where most of the overdoses are occurring, according to police data. The top five streets with their corresponding number of overdoses include: Main (62), Pleasant (40), Queen (29), Millbury (22) and Oread (20).

Rounding out the top 12 streets: Lincoln (18), Temple (17), Chandler and Washington Square (12 each), King and Pleasant Valley Drive (11 each) and Grafton (10).

"These are the most vulnerable areas in our city," said Castiel. She explained a higher risk of homelessness in these areas comes with increased risk of drug use. Also, with a general lack of community connections, the homeless often use drugs alone and that can lead to fatalities.

Efforts to reach District 4 City Councilor Sarai Rivera for comment on overdoses in her district were not successful.

### **Not enough shelter beds**

Exacerbating the problem is the recent closure of shelter beds including 15 at the former HARBOR program operated by Living in Freedom Together. Plus, the temporary closure of dozens of beds operated by Community Healthlink. Some Community Healthlink beds could reopen in the coming months, said officials.

Presently, the city has 154 shelter beds operated by the South Middlesex Opportunity Council including 100 at 25 Queen St. and 54 at the MLK Center. However, Queen Street is currently running over capacity because of the cold weather, said Castiel, and the mission is not to turn anyone away.

To alleviate a potentially dangerous situation this winter, Worcester is working with the South Middlesex Opportunity Council to open a 60-bed emergency shelter during the cold months, said Castiel. Last winter, a similar-sized shelter operated at Blessed Sacrament Church.

## **Supply and demand**

What explains the rising number of overdoses and deaths in Worcester? It seems to be a case of supply and demand.

Castiel explained even though there aren't enough shelter beds, Worcester is New England's second-largest city and has more drug treatment services than many other communities. As a result, those suffering with substance use come to Worcester looking for treatment. Castiel believes other communities need to step up and offer more treatment services, so people don't flow into Worcester looking for intake into an already strained system.

"Other areas in the community should have more (treatment services). We don't have shelters in smaller areas that need to have them," said Castiel.

## **Black and Hispanic communities: Disproportionate impact**

Meanwhile, there is a disproportionate number of overdose deaths in Hispanic and Black communities.

- While Hispanics in 2022 represented 4% of all deaths in Massachusetts, they accounted for 16% of all opioid-related overdose deaths in the same year.
- Blacks accounted for 5% of all deaths in 2022 and 11% of all opioid-related overdose deaths.
- Whites account for a lower percentage of opioid-related overdose deaths compared to overall deaths statewide: 86% of all deaths in Massachusetts and 69% of opioid-related deaths.

Castiel explained incarceration since the 1970s for those convicted of drug offenses, instead of programs to treat substance use as a disease, played a role in these disproportionate impacts.

"People with addiction were incarcerated and it increased their trauma," said Castiel. When they reentered society, "they were not able to access care, not able to get a job and not able to recover from that process."

## **More than 900 in shelter this winter?**

On the homeless front, Worcester is bracing for the possibility of a total of more than 900 people in shelters and encampments in February 2024, said Castiel. That compares to a tick above 800 people last February.

If the city experiences an arctic blast like the one that put the city in a deep freeze last winter when temperatures and windchill reached minus-30 degrees, then the city's shelter and warming centers could be stretched beyond its limits. Peak shelter demand on the coldest nights this winter could reach more than 360 adults nightly, compared to last year's peak demand of just under 320 nightly.

## **What is the solution?**

One solution is more permanent supportive housing beds and 25 came online recently at Luis Street. In addition, 90 more are slated to open in the future at the former Quality Inn on Oriol Drive.

Back in 2017, a task force comprised of city officials and the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts set a goal of establishing 103 units of permanent supportive housing, according to Castiel. That number was based on homeless figures at that time and Castiel said the job isn't finished. It takes time in the face of challenges including how to pay for the work.

Gov. Maura Healey beefed up the state's voucher program, said Castiel, which should help pay for some costs.

Another potential solution is so-called addiction treatment centers where monitors are present when someone uses illicit drugs. The goal is to prevent deaths and transition users to treatment.

New York City has the only two such facilities legally operating in the country and Castiel toured one earlier this year to get a closer look. She supports these centers coming to Worcester because, she said, they are proven to reduce drug-overdose mortality.

In addition, Castiel has gone on record to say that community organizations need to fund and operate them, but only after state lawmakers make supervised injection sites legal in Massachusetts.

*Contact Henry Schwan at [henry.schwan@telegram.com](mailto:henry.schwan@telegram.com). Follow him on X: [@henrytelegram](https://twitter.com/henrytelegram).*