

Wards 4/7 NPA Meeting, February 27, 2025  
Miller Community Center

Overdose Prevention Centers, Act 178

Ed Baker, Public Health Advocate, and Theresa (used to work for VermontCARES, now OPR Implementation Specialist), Bella Fern, Jess Kirby (Director of Client Services, Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform). Jess can be reached at [jess@vcjr.org](mailto:jess@vcjr.org).

Unprecedented rates of addiction and overdosing

Focusing on ways to make connections, relationships, and support most vulnerable

VCJR is interested in implementing ORC in Burlington

Ed shares: H.72/Act 178 was passed in June 2024: establishes a pilot program with settlement funds from corporations who contributed to opioid crisis through manufacturing these meds. It is not funded with taxpayer dollars. This is one piece in the larger picture of addressing the crisis.

Jess shares: a low-barrier program that meets people where they are at and builds relationships with them is an essential and effective way to provide support to people who are using drugs and shift toward changes.

Bella: OPRs exist across 14 countries and have been around for 34 years. 2 in USA: one in NYC, showing lots of data around how they have connected people to wraparound supports. In 2024, another one opened up in Rhode Island, that is showing some recent data that is very positive.

Theresa, Mayor Mulvaney-Stanak and Ingrid Jonas visited the OPR in Rhode Island, two weeks after it opened in Providence. Theresa says that it was a powerful experience to visit. All of the workers were peer staff: Folks who have used drugs in the past. One portion of the building was a community-based center providing medical care, treatment providers, holistic wellness providers, laundry, showers, meals, activities like arts and crafts, and the overall feel was one of very welcoming and safety. There's a separate space for consumption. The separation between non-use services and the actual safe space for using ensures that the other services are not at risk if legal questions require the OPR side of things to close down.

Councilor Litwin shares appreciation for the people who have worked hard to bring the OPC to being a reality, and asks how Turning Point will be engaged in providing these services. Jess responds that Turning Point focuses on recovery and requires people to not have used substances that day, which eliminates many people from services. Jess hopes that whoever implements the center does partner with Turning Point once people are ready to get into recovery.

Ed Baker speaks to the supply shock that happened in 2014, when supply shifted from prescription opioids, to heroin, to fentanyl. This led to an almost vertical increase in overdoses, as fentanyl is provided into our country from sources abroad.. Ed sees it as our duty to protect people from the dangers of this, as they became introduced to addiction when the substances were already lethal.

Ali Dieng wonders about a mobile site, and whether this has been considered. He expresses concern about where there could be a permanent site that maintains safety in the community. Bella says that studies show that OPCs do not lead to an increase in crime, and have sometimes led to a decrease. Jess responds that a mobile site would be a quicker interaction to prevent the overdose itself, and would not have the benefits of building relationships and connection that lead to larger shifts. A fixed location that is easy to access by foot, close to hospital, close to transportation, and data-driven. Ed responds that they have maps that show locations of overdoses, and half of the deaths in Vermont happen in downtown Burlington. In order to set it up by success, it has to be located in a space where there are no barriers. Ed believes it has to be in downtown BTV to be successful, in a proper setting that is out of the way, not going to interrupt business, and away from schools. A resident expresses skepticism that the surrounding area will not be affected.

Mark Barlow presents on his re-election campaign and takes questions: has been here for 50 years, mostly in the New North End. Serves on Transportation, Utilities and Committee, Board of Finance, and Parks Committee. He is also part of the Mayor's Tax Fairness Working Group, which looks at whether there are ways to make taxes more fair and equitable. Looking at models that other cities have used around tax fairness.

Sylvia Knight asks how he feels about the Fair and Impartial Policing Policy, which was passed in March 2020, and it will be very important with extreme immigration policies coming out of Washington. Mark replies: many of our neighbors who are afraid and we need to support them. We have heard reports of ICE in Burlington. Mark shares that he thanks the Mayor for her statement a few weeks ago. Sylvia presses: do you support the FIPP as passed several years ago? Mark says that he believes we do need fair and impartial policing. Mark says that we need sufficient oversight of the work of the department, but also support of them. Talks about the shortage of officers. Sylvia expands that the FIPP is about separating our city police activities from ICE activities. Mark clarifies that he supports it fully.

Ali Dieng thanks Mark for his service and reminds everyone that he is an Independent because he believes the neighborhood should not be about politics. He reminds Mark that the previous City administration was Democratic for 12 years, and asks Mark why he shifted from being Independent to being Democratic, now that we have a Progressive Mayor. He asks Mark how he feels about Mayor Mulvaney-Stanak's work, particularly around community safety. Mark responds that he spent a lot of time in his first term as an Independent trying to figure out how people were going to vote. He sat in with Democrats in his second term, and with a Prog Mayor the Democratic caucus no longer had a caucus lead. He offered to do this and so feels it would be disingenuous to run as an Independent, so has shifted to Dem status. As far as the question about working with the Mayor: He says that he wants the Mayor to be successful. He feels that he works well with everyone even if he does not vote with everyone. He feels that there is much agreement about the problems, but that there are different opinions about the solutions. Feels that everyone is invested in finding the solutions. Ali hopes that people will not let partisan disagreements will get in the way of progress.

Sequoiah Peace shares that police recently aimed assault weapons at him, and asks how he can get a resolution in that situation. Secondly: he asks if it is true that Mark is getting donations from landlord, and asks whether Mark will be siding with landlords, or tenants and homeless

people. Mark responds that he would be happy to talk with Sequoiah off-record about the experience he had. Mark says that yes, he has received money from landlords, including Ernie Pomerleau, and that some of this money helped to fund extra police details downtown during holiday season. Mark says he is proud of his donations and feels that property owners are allowed to donate on behalf of the community they are part of.

Monika Ivancic asks what happened to money approved in 2018 in another bond, and why we need another bond now. Mark explains that some of this is about infrastructure upgrades regarding water systems. Mark feels that we don't have much of a choice about this. He notes that institutions will pay for this infrastructure, since it is based on rate payers, including non-profits who don't pay taxes or are tax-exempt. Mark states that he supports all the bonds. Mark notes that we have raised public safety tax, rooms and meals tax, and still don't have the funds to cover a budget gap. He notes that this money needs to be found before June when a budget is passed. So this means the savings have to be found somewhere else, such as in city operations. He anticipates having these hard discussions between now and June. Monica expresses disappointment over the need for the Main Street project that seems more optional, whereas the water bonds are not optional, and feels that this is leading to people being priced out. Mark clarifies that there are improvements happening below street level that are not optional and will be enabling other important improvements that are not possible now, such as Memorial Block improvements.