



# VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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## Perception, Reality and Hope: Addressing Substance Use Disorder

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Dr. Cynthia Persily is CEO of Highland Hospital, Highland Behavioral Health Services and Highland Health Center. The mission of the Highland family of companies is to provide high-quality mental health and addiction services to children, adolescents and adults in a caring environment. Dr. Persily is charged with setting strategic direction, assuring financial viability, development of new business and evaluation of programming for the organizations.

A native of the Philadelphia area, Dr. Persily has been a registered nurse for over 35 years. She earned her bachelor's degree in nursing from East Stroudsburg University, and holds a master's degree and Ph.D. in nursing and health and social policy from the University of Pennsylvania.

An accomplished leader, administrator, researcher and clinician, Dr. Persily has lived in Charleston, West Virginia for over 24 years.

We've all seen the headlines, and now the documentaries.

*West Virginia has the highest drug overdose death rate in the nation...*

*Why the opioid epidemic is so bad in West Virginia...*

*Acknowledging West Virginia's drug problem ...*

*Addicted State ...*

These are just a few.

At Highland Hospital, Process Strategies and Highland Health Center in Charleston, West Virginia, we treat people in the grip of addiction every day. Many other providers do the same. Whether we are caring for adults in our hospital who have been self-treating their psychiatric diagnoses with illicit or prescription drugs, or children who have experienced the trauma inflicted through living in an environment where drug use is rampant or we are caring for people who come to us for help withdrawing from alcohol or drugs and for recovery care, we are seeing the ravages of substance use disorder on a daily basis. It's not easy for our patients, or for their families. It's a struggle for our communities, and a stressor for our care providers. But the bottom line – there is hope.

Let's talk about substance use disorder (SUD), a chronic brain disorder with a chance for recurrence. Like any other chronic disease, the impact of SUD is felt in many parts of an individual's life. Work or school might be impacted. Relationships may be affected. Routines may be altered because of the chronic disease. And, most importantly, care and attention is needed to control the chronic disease. Understanding addiction as a brain



disease has significant implications for the public perception of addicts and their families, for addiction treatment practice and for aspects of public policy.

What about perception? More and more we are hearing the discussion of addiction as a chronic disease. This shift in perception will help as we develop prevention and treatment programs and get away from the thinking that the person with SUD is to "blame" for their disease. The need to remove the stigma of addiction is never more important than today. Treatment services will only work if those who need them feel comfortable seeking them out.

So, what about addiction treatment? More and more, treatment is evidence-based. Addiction science has helped us understand more about this brain disorder, and helps us to target interventions and individualize approaches to addiction treatment. While we still have a shortage of some levels of treatment, we are improving in West Virginia. The 1-844-HELP4WV hotline, an initiative of the Governor's Substance Abuse Advisory Council, is a tangible effort to link people to services, and more and more people are reaching out to be linked to care. This model has been adopted by other states and, in some cases, is being managed by staff in West Virginia.



*Highland Hospital, located in Charleston, West Virginia, has been serving the West Virginia community for over 60 years, providing quality mental health care, an educated staff and a safe environment*

Reimbursement strategies are being analyzed by our government and private payers to facilitate access to care for those with SUD. Health care leaders in West Virginia have expressed strong concern over proposed health care bills that would limit treatment dollars in Medicaid. The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau for Behavioral Health and Health Facilities, recently released a request for proposals to fund more residential treatment beds through the *Ryan Brown Fund Substance Use Disorder Residential Treatment Expansion* initiative funded by the legislature. At the federal level, the President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis should be releasing a report with recommendations shortly.

Finally, what about public policy? The good news is that people are finally talking about substance use. Forums around the state are bringing stakeholders like legislators, providers, police, community members, the religious community and those who have suffered from SUD to

talk about how they can deal with the disorder in their community. These discussions are informing policy, and policy changes are being developed to address the issue.

*The Second Chance for Employment Act* that was passed by the West Virginia Legislature in the 2017 session will allow those with non-violent felonies, including those with drug convictions who have a clean record for 10 years, to petition the court to have their conviction reduced to a misdemeanor. This will allow those who are recovering from addiction to get the jobs that they need in order to stabilize their lives.

While we don't always agree about how to help, the discussion is ongoing in every corner of our state. We will make progress in dealing with drug issues when we recognize that SUD is a chronic disease and when our discussion and our actions are as complex and comprehensive as the problem. Our approaches need to deal with every aspect of the disease, from

prevention, appropriate prescribing and supply control, to treatment, recovery and community healing.

So, while the situation is dire, things are happening that make me hopeful that, as a state, we will overcome the problems of substance use. As West Virginians, we will once again roll up our sleeves and we will fight this disease. It's going to take all of us working together, recognizing substance use disorder as a chronic disease, finding the resources to have a multipronged approach and the will to make a difference. We can change the headlines. Our future generations deserve no less. ▽