

# The Bulletin

By [Adam Benson](#)

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## UCFS focuses on education amid opioid epidemic

NORWICH — In the fight against Eastern Connecticut's opioid crisis, United Community and Family Services' chief medical officer is not shy about pointing out what needs to be done.

"If the objective is to stop the scourge, whoever started it needs to be trained not to," Ramindra Walia said Monday during an afternoon discussion with U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2<sup>nd</sup> District, about steps the Norwich-based nonprofit is taking to reduce prescription drug dependency among its patients.

"We knew this epidemic was around. We knew our primary care physicians were under stress to prescribe pain medications so the pressure built up, and that's the bubble that's bursting now," he said.

UCFS administrators have spent the last year developing a 14-week curriculum to train medical staff on speaking to patients about alternatives to prescriptive treatments. The program includes a series of short videos that are shown to clients on topics such as meditation, smoking cessation and the pain cycle.

As a result, the number of prescriptions written out of UCFS has dropped from 2,172 between January and March of 2015 to 1,546 this year.

But starting April 1, UCFS will begin stocking naloxone, a drug that can reverse overdoses if administered immediately.

"We're responsible as prescribers, and we need to do education, and it's really started to shake us to think about what we're creating with these 4 and 5 year olds who are pushed onto medication," Nancy Cowser, senior vice president of strategy at UCFS, said.

Monday's conversation came a day before the start of the National Rx Drug Abuse and Heroin Summit in Atlanta, headlined by President Obama.

Courtney, who has participated in talks about the opioid situation across his Congressional district, said UCFS is approaching the issue in a different but significant way.

"The link here is this (prescription drug dependency) is the pathway to heroin addiction," he said. "The only way you're going to get over the scary number of deaths and overdoses is education. It doesn't diminish the need for treatment and law enforcement, but at the end of the day, if this country's going to make any progress, it's in that area, so this is really impressive."

Cara Westcott, who leads UCFS' Behavioral Health Services department, said the training course has been beneficial for clients there as well.

"People want their medical marijuana or the narcotic or a particular medication," she said. "With the registries and shared records, it's a patient education opportunity as well to say, 'we're an integrated team and we work together.'"



U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, talks with United Community and Family Services CEO Jennifer Granger Monday about the region's opioid problem. Adam Benson/NorwichBulletin.com

At a glanceNarcan-prescribing pharmacists in Eastern Connecticut include:McQuade's, Mystic Quality Care, New LondonGreenville Pharmacy, NorwichSalem Health Mart, Salem

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