

## Learn to Cope reaches out to families of jail inmates in Bristol County

The Bristol County sheriff's office will host meetings of Learn to Cope for families of drug-addicted inmates to help the prisoners stay straight after release.

By **Maureen Boyle**

**ENTERPRISE STAFF WRITER**

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DARTMOUTH — As opiate addiction continues to grow in the region, the family support group Learn to Cope is reaching behind bars to help jailed addicts stay clean once they're freed.

Learn to Cope is hosting a new group at the Bristol County House of Correction for families of jailed addicts, the first in this area, as part of the effort to curb opiate addiction.

"Families need to know how they can help once their family member comes home, without enabling the addiction," Joanne Peterson, founder of Learn to Cope ([learn2cope.org](http://learn2cope.org)), said. "You don't want the person to come home, relapse and get back into crime again. It is a revolving door."

Sixteen percent of jail and prison inmates committed crimes to get drugs, according to a 2004 study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. About a quarter of those convicted of property or drug crimes did it to get drugs, the study found. Another study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found 68 percent of jail inmates suffered from substance abuse.

Bernard Sullivan, spokesman for Bristol County Sheriff Thomas Hodgson, said substance abuse is the root of inmate problems and the sheriff saw the importance of working with Learn to Cope. The sheriff gave the group the OK after members of his staff, including Sullivan, approached him with the idea.

"He knows the importance of family support for the inmates," Sullivan said. "Over the course of time it becomes very clear that the support of the family is very important when they get out. It is our job to send them out better prepared than when they came in."

The sheriff's department learned about Learn to Cope through "Wasted Youth," the series of stories in The Enterprise last year detailing the toll opiate addiction has taken in the greater Brockton-Taunton area, Sullivan said.

The Enterprise in two special reports, "Wasted Youth" and "Deadly Surge," reviewed death certificates in 28 local communities and found 113 people died of opiate overdoses between Jan. 1, 2004, and Aug. 31, 2007, and 31 died of overdoses of oxycodone, the chief ingredient in the highly addictive painkiller OxyContin

Nationally, the use of heroin and opiates has continued to rise among eighth-graders and high school students, according to the yearly survey, Monitoring the Future.

"The Enterprise has really been in the forefront of this issue," Sullivan said. "There are very few newspapers that have exerted as much effort into this issue, and making the problem known to the public."

Peterson said she is looking forward to working with the inmates' families.

"It is very important for parents and families to be educated on what to do when the family member comes home," she said. "With more education, we can recognize signs and symptoms and motivate our kids to want treatment. Without help, the odds of them going back to jail are very high."

Maureen Boyle can be reached at [mboyle@enterpriseneews.com](mailto:mboyle@enterpriseneews.com).