



BARBALUNGA FOR SHERIFF

Press Release: 7/26/22

“Time For a Change - Justice That Works”

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Bowler Delayed 8 Years Before Accepting Treatment For Inmate Drug Abusers

BERKSHIRE COUNTY—The current sheriff of the Berkshire County Jail wasted nearly an entire decade before accepting Medication Assistance Therapy (MAT) for inmates struggling with drug addiction. Despite widespread evidence-based research showing that opioid treatment programs are successful in helping inmates recover from drug addiction, Sheriff Tom Bowler dragged his feet and openly expressed opposition to such programs.

According to Alf Barbalunga, who is running for sheriff in the September 6th Democratic Primary, Sheriff Tom Bowler spoke at a forum hosted by the City of Pittsfield and Spectrum Health Systems in 2012, raising issues **against** the opening of a methadone clinic to treat opiate addicts. Bowler said the clinic would become "a venue that has an enormous amount of lower-class people that are addicted hanging around."

Bowler’s own staff has estimated that 90% of the inmates at the Berkshire County House of Correction have substance abuse issues or mental health issues. Yet Bowler himself had a “cold turkey” theory about drug addiction recovery. In 2018, Sheriff Bowler told WAMC about his approach:

“Those who are out on the street, and they are on a maintenance program – medically assisted treatment program with Suboxone or methadone – once they’re arrested and they come in here, we don’t provide the methadone or Suboxone. First of all, we don’t have a license to do that, for one reason. But at the same time, we’re firm believers in abstinence.”

Bowler went on to say that medically assisted treatment was "misguided," and he was upset that state lawmakers "were going to force this medically assisted treatment down our throats."

“It was Sheriff Bowler who was misguided,” says Barbalunga. “The facts are that while abstinence may work for some, a prisoner relapsing after a “cold-turkey” abstinence program who obtains opiates on the street is at greater risk of opiate overdose, especially drugs tainted with fentanyl.

The evidence proves that Bowler was wrong. According to a Massachusetts Department of Public Health Report, “the opioid overdose death rate is 120 times higher for those recently released from incarceration compared to the rest of the adult population.” DPH reported that “in 2015, opioids accounted for almost 50% of all deaths among formerly incarcerated people.” They go on to refer to this as “especially horrifying given that proven treatment methods for opioid use disorders exist — they just aren’t accessible to people in and recently released from prison.”

Perhaps Franklin County Sheriff Christopher Donelan said it best. “There have been several studies that show that when you put men or women in jail, force them to detox off treatment, they leave totally destabilized, literally drug seeking missiles, and that is when they’re at the greatest risk to overdose and die.”

Fortunately, in 2018, the same year that Bowler was upset about MAT, State Senator Cindy Friedman (D-Arlington) sponsored legislation on Beacon Hill (which passed in 2019) to increase access to medically assisted treatment for prisoners, creating a pilot program that was implemented by Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin, Middlesex, Norfolk and Suffolk county Sheriffs.

[The support for the program was strong:](#)

“Arresting and incarcerating our way out of addiction is not – and has never been – an option,” said Middlesex Sheriff, and Massachusetts Sheriffs’ Association President, Peter J. Koutoujian, who worked with legislators to craft the language for the pilot.

“Addiction is a disease, and medication assisted treatment is one of the many pathways for individuals to achieve long-term recovery,” said Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders.

“Medication for opioid use disorder works,” said Department of Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel, MD, MPH. “This is one more way to assure people who need treatment receive it.”

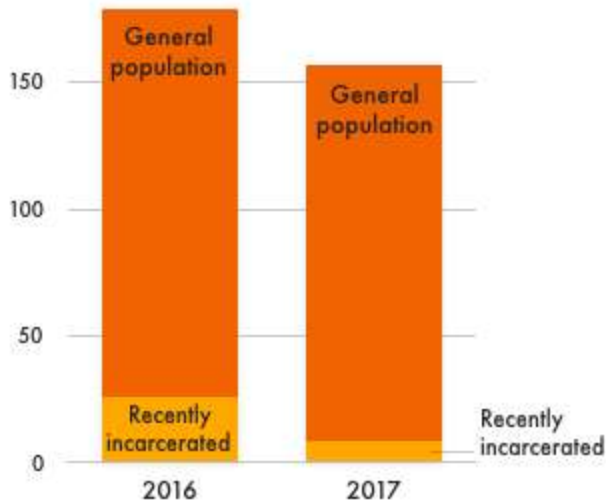
Sheriff Donelan in Franklin County, who [brought women back from Chicopee to his facility](#) when he realized they weren’t getting the same access to MAT as the men, agreed:

“With opioid addiction, quitting “cold turkey” is not a viable option. With the ability to access treatment while serving time, an individual may have a better chance of finding success when they are released,” Donelan said.

Meanwhile, in 2018, Sheriff Bowler watched from the sidelines and declined to participate in the pilot drug treatment program.

Medication-Assisted Treatment helps reduce fatal overdoses

Fatal overdoses in the first 6 months of the year fell after the Rhode Island DOC implemented a MAT program in 2016



The Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association hailed what they called "a landmark initiative providing expanded medication-assisted treatment options to those with opioid-use disorder at correctional facilities in seven counties."

Senator Friedman wrote: "In Massachusetts, nearly 1 out of every 11 individuals dying from opioid-related overdoses has a history of incarceration in state jails and prisons, and in 2015 alone, nearly 50% of all deaths among those released from incarceration were opioid-related. In response, this bill makes significant strides towards extending access to medication assisted treatment in correctional facilities...While we need to continue our efforts to end the criminalization of substance

use disorder and mental illness, we must do everything we can to meet the needs of those who are currently incarcerated...The creation of this program is an important and groundbreaking step toward addressing substance use disorder within corrections so that people can get the medication they need and have the opportunity to recover."

But medication treatment was slow to start in Berkshire County.

In 2019, following a Federal Court Case mandating MAT treatment in prisons, Sheriff Bowler finally began offering buprenorphine to treat Opiate Abuse Disorder, 8 years after he was sworn in.

In February 2021, the United States Attorney's Office for the District of Massachusetts (USAO) opened a compliance review of Sheriff Bowler's jail, under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (the ADA), as part of a review of all Massachusetts county sheriffs' offices that had not implemented a program offering all three forms of medications used to treat Opioid Use Disorder (OUD).

It wasn't until November of 2021, during an interview with the Berkshire Eagle, Sheriff Bowler stated that while he had doubted MAT, "The jail and house of correction now offers Vivitrol Suboxone and methadone." Bowler admitted that he later saw that treatment was "starting to assist people and their families."

It wasn't until February, 2022, the US Attorney's office finally closed its review of Sheriff Bowler, finding that he was finally authorized to administer buprenorphine, methadone, and naltrexone.

“Tragically, during nearly ten years of resisting the data and advice to administer MAT,” Barbalunga said, “Sheriff Bowler left Berkshire inmates addicted to opioids with no access to medication assistance treatment, just Bowler’s notion of abstinence.”

By contrast, Alf Barbalunga has endorsed MAT for years. In 2007, Barbalunga, as Chief Probation Officer, partnered with Berkshire Health Systems, and created the Berkshire Partnership in Care Pilot Program (BPICPP). This revolutionary program was implemented in May of 2008 and focused on combating and reacting to opiate abuse, well before the May of 2019 Federal Court decision mandating inclusion of all components of the Medically Assisted Treatment (MAT) in prisons, and enforcing Massachusetts Senator Friedman’s 2019 opiate law.

“As someone who specializes in the care of prisoners after their release,” Barbalunga said, “you will see a major attitude change when I am elected Sheriff. I have been a leader and proponent of MAT treatment for more than 15 years. No one had to drag me to that conclusion.”

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