

A blight in the Magic Valley: Substance abuse reaching epidemic proportions

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Ed Olivas stands outside New Hope Transition Center where he works as a night manager on Sept. 17 in Twin Falls.

DREW NASH, TIMES-NEWS

TWIN FALLS — Ed Olivas had been clean and sober for 14 years before a leg injury caused him to spiral back into drug use.

“They gave me anything I wanted,” he said of his medical providers during the three years he spent in a wheelchair, in pain, then re-learning how to walk.

When the medications stopped relieving his pain, he moved on to methamphetamine.

In March 2018, Olivas was arrested for possession of a controlled substance.

He posted bail and signed up with the court compliance program but continued using the illegal, addictive substance. By October, he landed right back in a cell.

After pleading guilty to the drug charge, the Drug Court program accepted him for enrollment in January.

It was a useful avenue toward recovery.

“Drug Court has helped me tremendously,” Olivas said.

He’d spent nearly five months in jail and came out clean.

But the process was a struggle.

“Being in jail is not easy,” Olivas said. The Twin Falls County Jail is overcrowded, and the treatment options for addicts are limited.

Drug Court, on the other hand, is tied in with the Treatment and Recovery Clinic, or TARC.

Through the Drug Court’s collaboration with vocational rehabilitation programs, Olivas received paid training to earn his Commercial Driver’s License.

He continues to receive one-on-one counseling and is working with his wife and daughter to reunite the family.

Since his release from jail, Olivas has been living at New Hope Transitional Center, where he is employed as night manager. He also drives a truck for an asphalt company. His goal is to earn enough money to find a home large enough for his family.



Ed Olivas sits at his desk Sept. 17 at New Hope Transition Center in Twin Falls.

DREW NASH, TIMES-NEWS

He attends Drug Court sessions at the Twin Falls County Courthouse every three weeks and is now in Phase 3 of the program. The drug tests and drug treatment continue, and he also regularly attends Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

He is invested in the process.

“It takes a lot to turn a person around from drugs,” Olivas said.

How does addiction start?

He fought hard to get into Drug Court, calling it, “the Cadillac of drug programs.”

Olivas speaks from a long history of substance dependency.

“Drug addiction controlled most of my adult life,” he said. He used alcohol and drugs until getting clean in 2000 at age 40. Afterward, he was in a therapeutic setting for a year.

Before his relapse, he’d been employed as a truck parts salesman. Now, with his CDL, he’s able to work despite the ongoing pain in his leg.

“I always wanted to be a truck driver,” he said.

He has met one major goal he set for himself, and Drug Court has helped him meet others. He sees the important role it plays in his rehabilitation.

“When you first start, it’s scary,” Olivas said. “I’m getting a lot more out of it than being in prison.”

Before each Drug Court session, representatives from **vocational rehabilitation**, TARC, and the Probation and Parole Office, along with Israel Enriquez, the Drug Court coordinator, and the presiding judge meet to discuss every case.

“That’s a lot of people sitting at a table, going to bat for you,” Olivas said. “That feels good.”

He’s seen some Drug Court participants get placed in handcuffs and led off to jail, or receive sanctions, which are disciplinary measures.

“Drug Court gives them every chance in the world,” he said.

Standing before the judge, being able to report on his progress, means a lot to Olivas.

“It’s nice to get a big pat on the back,” he said.

In April 2020, he will graduate from the program, one he feels has shifted his life positively.

“My health is a lot better,” he said. “My wife says I’m the person I used to be.”

A local problem reaches epidemic proportions

Almost daily, judges utter the charge “Possession of a controlled substance” at the Twin Falls County Courthouse, in the process of arraigning individuals recently arrested, accepting pleas or passing sentence.

The frequency of drug possession and other drug-related crimes, such as trafficking or possession of paraphernalia, is increasing in the Magic Valley.

As effective as Drug court seems to be, it is woefully inadequate to deal with the numbers. The Opioid crisis was created by the Pharmaceutical companies and Idaho should be looking to them to pay for it. Much of the officer's time is consumed with arresting, processing and court time for people caught with substances that surrounding states have made available for recreation and therefore, rarely becomes a police matter anymore. The taxpayer funds that frees up must be substantial. When a conservative state like Utah gets on the bandwagon, that should be a clue for Idaho to rethink how they are doing things. Economically, many young folks are left behind. One would think that might be a significant factor as well.