

Big pharma opioid settlement makes it to McHenry County, helping ‘people who were hurt the most’

Money supports effort to help people in recovery from addiction



By Amanda Marrazzo

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Patrick Slocum, 44, of Woodstock photographed in Crystal Lake on Friday, September 22, 2023, was hired as an outreach coordinator for Live4Lali that used money from the opioid settlement fund. Slocum, in his 16th month of recovery, will connect with people in the community

struggling with addiction. Ryan Rayburn for Shaw Local (Ryan Rayburn for Shaw Local/Ryan Rayburn for Shaw Local)

Patrick Slocum of Woodstock was “in and out” of his addiction to crystal meth for about 10 years. It wasn’t until he hit his rock bottom last year with a near fatal overdose followed by an arrest months later that he said he turned his life around.

Today, in recovery and helping others, Slocum, 44, calls the date of his arrest his “rescue date.”



“It really saved my life,” he said.

His case was adjudicated and he was accepted into McHenry County drug court, which led to a volunteer gig that turned into a paid job as a McHenry County outreach coordinator with Live4Lali.

Slocum’s newly created position, as well as other new and expanded services provided in the county by Arlington Heights-based Live4Lali, is being paid for through a \$69,000 grant. The grant was allocated from the county’s \$3.41 million portion of a nationwide negotiated opioid settlement received from a 2017 lawsuit filed against large opioid manufacturers.




“That is exactly who these funds should go to, those people impacted by all the lies.”

— Laura Fry, executive director for Live4Lali

The dollars are the county’s portion of a global \$26 billion settlement agreed to in 2021 by opioid manufacturer Janssen Pharmaceutical, a biotechnology subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson, and the “Big Three” drug distributors, McKesson Corp., AmerisourceBergen and Cardinal Health, according to a statement from the law firm Simmons Hanly Conroy.

The opioid settlement is intended to be used for opioid and substance use disorder prevention, treatment and recovery.

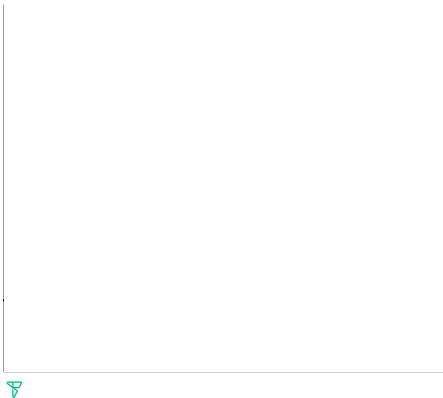
Although the fiscal year runs December through November, the settlement dollars did not become available until April 1, Leonetta Rizzi, executive director of the McHenry County Mental Health Board, said.



Rizzi said the mental health board is “ecstatic” to partner with the McHenry County State’s Attorney’s Office through 2038 to distribute the funds.

It is an area of the community that is in need of more funding, she said.

“We have a greater need than we can support through our Community Mental Health Funds,” Rizzi said.



Laura Fry, executive director for Live4Lali, said the settlement is “really targeting the people hurt the most by the big pharma companies who were manufacturing and putting out opioids that they said were not addictive.”

“That is exactly who these funds should go to, those people impacted by all the lies,” Fry said.

In April, the health board distributed just more than \$215,000 among three agencies: Live4Lali; New Directions in Crystal Lake, which received a little more than \$46,000; and Northern Illinois Recovery Center, which received \$100,000, Rizzi said.



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“We want to make an impact with these funds, and I know we are with the dedication of these agencies. ... which is phenomenal,” Rizzi said. “Our overdose deaths continue to be lower than surrounding areas, but the 39 deaths by overdose we had last year are 39 too many.”

NIRC, a private for-profit detox and treatment facility in Crystal Lake, was granted the funds to care for uninsured clients. The funding will help provide detoxification, residential and intensive outpatient treatment for about 25 people with alcohol and drug use disorders who are uninsured residents of McHenry County, Rizzi said.

On Dec. 1, the board will begin distributing about \$530,000 for fiscal 2023. The application process occurred between June 1 and July 31. Those selected will be announced in October. The board received nine applications with requests of almost \$2 million, Rizzi said.



Bobby Gattone is executive director for New Directions, whose mission is to support recovery from substance abuse disorders by offering sober living homes, operating McHenry County’s “A Way Out” program and running The Other Side sober bar in Crystal Lake.

Gattone said the money they received is being used to pay for more staff for the “A Way Out” program, which provides peer support for anyone looking for resources such as detox treatments, recovery coaching, family support and a free hotline that operates seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Gattone said the four employees on hand were not able to keep up with all the calls the hotline was receiving. The extra money helps pay for one more person to answer those calls and handle other tasks.



“They get 150 people calling monthly, which adds up to 400 calls a month,” Gattone said.

But, when not taking calls, “A Way Out” employees are making calls.

They are searching for helpful resources, building checklists, finding beds for people, participating in community outreach and naloxone training, he said.



Naloxone is a substance that if given to a person experiencing an opioid overdose quick enough can reverse its deadly effects.

Gattone said “finally” seeing the funds filter through the community is much appreciated. He especially appreciates the work McHenry County State’s Attorney Patrick Kenneally did to help secure those funds.



“People in our field have been hearing about these settlements for years but not seeing anything,” Gattone said. “We had never seen a dime of it come through to actually help the programs. It is great that it is finally making its way to us.”



Gattone has applied again for the funds for next year. Should his application be granted, he hopes to hire extra staff so the hotline can be operated 24 hours a day. He also hopes to have extra funds to pay for staff to go to emergency rooms where someone has overdosed and is asking for help in detoxing and recovery.

“Often, they just talk to a nurse and they leave [the hospital] and go back to using drugs or drinking,” Gattone said. “We want to get to them [in the hospital], give them a chance to talk to someone actually in recovery. We are really pushing for that. That is something that will really save lives.”

Slocum’s job at Live4Lali includes meeting people struggling and providing naloxone training in-person and virtually, a new offering afforded by the settlement dollars that allows someone to participate confidentially, Stefanie Gattone, the McHenry County program manager for Live4Lali.



Stafanie Gattone, who is Bobby Gattone's wife, said during virtual training people are not required to turn on their cameras.

It helps "remove any barriers we have seen that prevent people from reaching out or getting trained [to use naloxone]," she said.

The funding also pays for a new delivery program for people who need harm reduction supplies such as fentanyl and Xylazine test strips delivered to them at home.



Slocum also hosts support meetings, attends community and pop-up events, distributes fentanyl testing strips and helps people find housing and recovery programs.

Helping others walk through their recovery, Slocum said, helps maintain his own. He is grateful for hitting his rock bottom, entering drug court and meeting people along the way in the recovery community. He said they all paved his "path to a better future" and hopes his story helps others.

"For so long, I have wanted to be the person I am today," he said, "but my addiction kept holding me back. If my story can help somebody, I hope it does. If I can help anybody, one person, all of this is worth it."

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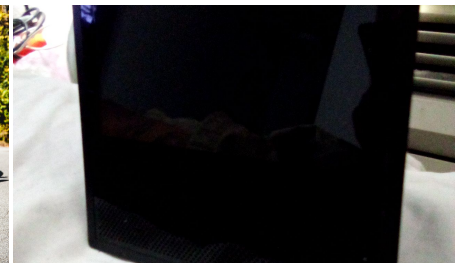
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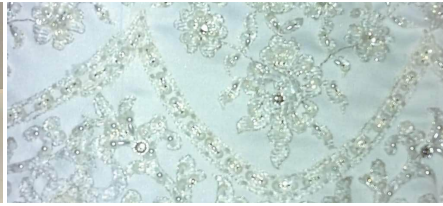




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