

MAT program at Gaiser Center promises higher addiction recovery rates

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The Ellen O'Brien Gaiser Center on Old Plank Road is marking 50 years of fighting drug and alcohol addiction. Butler Eagle file photo

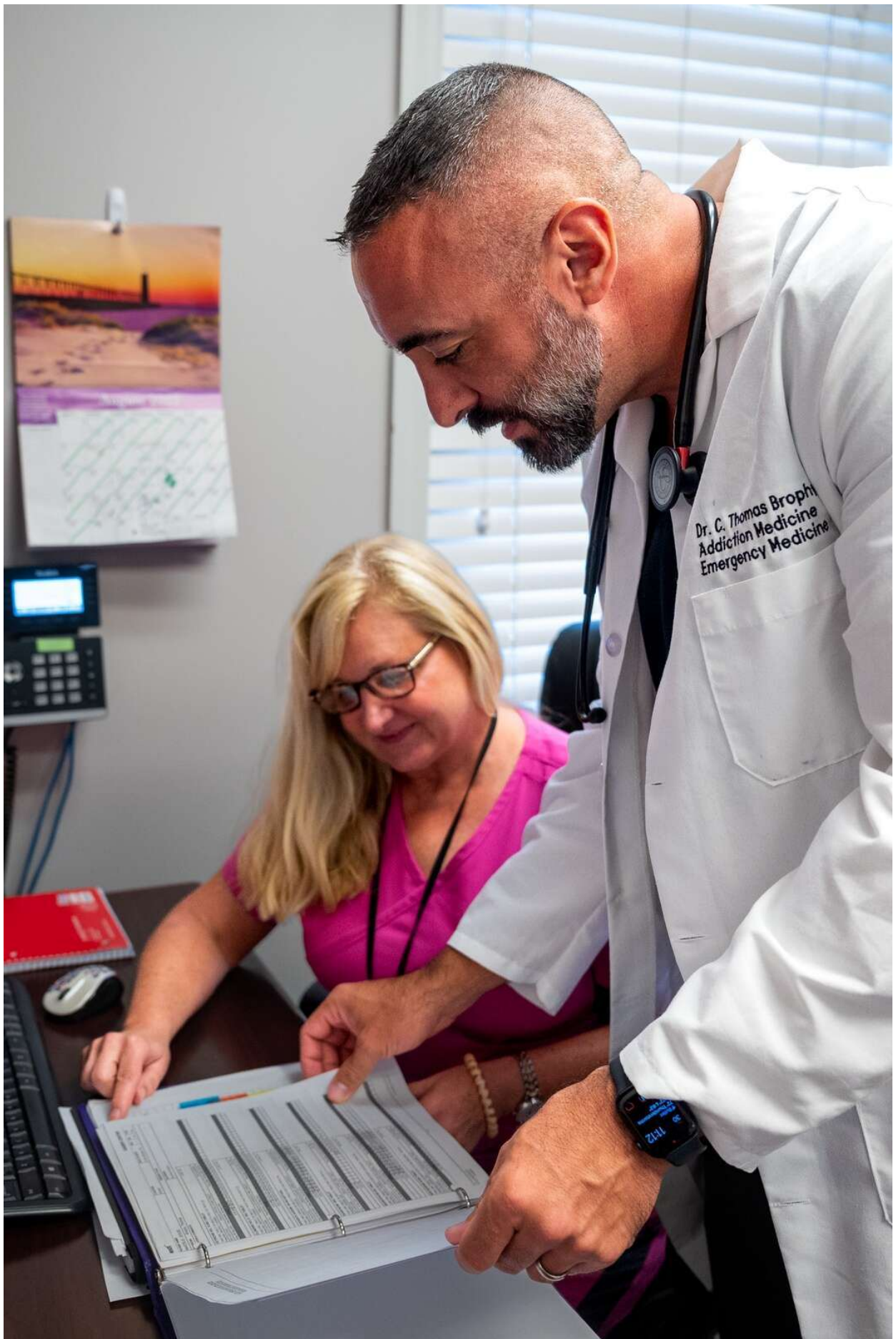
Remembering loved ones lost to addiction and those who share their stories after surviving it can be helpful to anyone who might be heading down a similar path.

Wednesday, Aug. 31, is International Overdose Awareness Day, which caps off National Overdose Awareness month, and the Ellen O'Brien Gaiser Center in Butler is bringing attention to this through new programs, including one at the Butler County Prison.

"It first serves as a remembrance for those that unfortunately have passed due to overdoses," said Joe Mahoney, Gaiser Center executive director. "We are trying to reduce the stigma and have our families in the community that have been affected by overdose loss feel more comfortable speaking about it and remembering their loved ones and joining together to do that."

Starting Thursday, the Gaiser Center will be conducting education groups at Butler County Prison as well as Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) services.

"These groups are going to center on life skills, healthy living and give them the skills they need to reacclimate to society," Mahoney said. "We estimate we will be running two groups every week – two for men, two for women – so actually four groups total."



Dr. C. Thomas Brophy, Medical Director at Gaiser Center, checks paperwork with registered nurse Kathleen Bollinger at The Ellen O'Brien Gaiser Center in Butler on Tuesday. Cary Shaffer/Butler Eagle

Dr. Tom Brophy, the medical director at Gaiser, explained that MATs have been an increasing trend in addiction treatment, through Food and Drug Administration approved drugs such as methadone, suboxone, vivitrol and antabuse.

“When Gaiser initially brought me in on a part-time basis, it was because they wanted to move more toward a medically supportive model,” Brophy said. “When I started full time, they were fully ready to embrace it.”

There often is a MAT option for every patient, but that can be determined by many factors, and that is where Brophy comes into play.

Higher recovery rates

Brophy says based on research, success rates and recovery rates are much higher when MATs are embraced.

“For example, a 30-day program that is abstinence-based only, they only have a success rate of 3 to 5%” Brophy said.

“When MAT came along, and with each individual form of MAT, it boosts your success rate to a higher degree. Every MAT option comes with a different success rate and in some situations you can use two forms of MATs.”

“Finding the right MAT for that individual depends on a lot of things,” he added. “How long did they abuse that drug and were they on other drugs?”

Anna Shuster, clinical director at Gaiser, has been in the field of addiction treatment since 2004 and with Gaiser since 2017. She said she has seen friends of hers struggle with addiction throughout the years and says it’s important to bring attention to addiction through International Overdose Day.

“I think it’s important to recognize how many people are affected,” Shuster said. “Putting it out there and finding in reality how many people are affected I think is important.”

A ceremony was held in downtown Butler on Aug. 24 by the Butler County Opioid Overdose Coalition in remembrance of Butler County victims of the ongoing opioid crisis.



Dr. C. Thomas Brophy, medical director at Gaiser Center, Butler, works in his office on Tuesday. Cary Shaffer/Butler Eagle

During the ceremony, Lisa Gill, prevention specialist with Butler County Human Services Drug and Alcohol programs, stated there have been 32 overdose deaths in the county so far this year, with seven possible cases still pending.

“Like many things, when we look at it after the fact and we collect all the data, then other things come to play that are discovered,” Brophy said. She added that substance abuse and overdoses are occurring, and “we are trying to do everything we can to try and reach those people that need help.”

According to the coalition, there have been 581 overdose deaths in Butler County since 2011; 68.2% were male and 31.8% female.

Disease, not debate

Brophy said he is adamant in the argument that addiction should be categorized as a disease, based on results he often finds in functional MRIs.

“I use that to show people that addiction is a disease,” Brophy said. “The question is whether addiction is more of a choice or a disease, and people are very hesitant to call it a disease because, in their mind, they think it's like calling it cancer. But that's not what we are saying. We are saying there is a measurable pathology behind it and you can look at a diagnostic image.”

The disease process is reversible, according to Brophy, but it can take some time for the brain to heal.

He explained that the best angle of attack to combating addiction involves a “comprehensive approach” involving many different things.

“You look at the brain chemistry that has resulted from the drugs that they have been using, and you do whatever you can to stabilize that while also detoxing the drugs out of their system,” Brophy said.

“Now everyone follows what we call the ASAM guidelines,” Brophy added. “ASAM stands for American Society of Addiction Medicine, and they have treatment guidelines and placement guidelines. What they have done is standardized everything so that everybody treating addiction is following the same rule book.”

Brophy said a lot of the health systems have been cracking down hard on those trying to cheat the system by faking complaints and trying to obtain opioids.

He also believes COVID did shake things up due to everyone staying at home.

“During COVID, we saw rising numbers of alcohol and opioid abuse, but we are not seeing rising numbers of people seeking treatment,” Brophy said. “That is a gray area. All of the facilities I'm associated with, both inpatient and outpatient, have seen a drop in their numbers, but we all know alcohol sales are climbing and opioid deaths are climbing.”

Brophy said it is important to have a specific day and month dedicated to bringing awareness to the issue of addiction.

He said he thinks it crosses all family boundaries and demographics and thinks people have seen enough lost people from their communities.

“When you have a day that's dedicated to it, it brings attention to it and helps drive everything from fundraising to understanding and empathy,” Brophy said. “I'm all for that kind of stuff, and I do embrace and participate in it and I feel it is important.”