

## OPIOID EPIDEMIC



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Amanda Judd (from left), Valley Health perinatal substance use disorder liaison; Teresa Clawson, Valley Health medical director, Winchester Medical Center neonatal intensive care unit; and Healthy Families Northern Shenandoah Valley Executive Director Sara Schoonover-Martin were three of the panel speakers at the Substance Exposed Infants (SEIs) – Barriers to Identification and Treatment Northern Regional Town Hall on Monday at the Our Health Eagles Community Conference Center.

# Drug-affected baby increase spurs Virginia town hall tour

By **BRIAN BREHM**  
The Winchester Star

**WINCHESTER** — As the region's opioid epidemic rages on, a new generation of children is starting life addicted to drugs.

The disturbing statewide increase in babies born with drugs in their system — known as substance-exposed infants, or SEIs — prompted the Virginia General Assembly to enact legislation this year establishing a work group to study barriers to treatment of afflicted newborns.

The group is hosting a series of town halls throughout the state to gather input from health care, social services and legal workers dealing with the crisis.

The first of those town halls

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People attend the Substance Exposed Infants (SEIs) – Barriers to Identification and Treatment Northern Regional Town Hall on Monday at the Our Health Eagles Community Conference Center.

# Town hall

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was Monday afternoon at the Our Health center on North Cameron Street in Winchester.

About 50 people from throughout the Department of Social Services' Northern Virginia region, which includes Winchester and Frederick and Clarke counties, discussed what is working, what isn't working, and what needs to be done to help substance-exposed infants and their families.

"This afternoon is for us to listen to you," Carl Ayers, director of the Virginia Department of Social Services' Division of Family Services, said at the start of the two-hour session.

State Sen. Jennifer Wexton, D-33rd, who represents Sterling, Dulles and parts of Herndon and Leesburg and is running for the 10th Congressional District nomination, told the attendees there is an urgent need to find solutions. In fiscal year 2015, she said, mothers gave birth to 1,099 substance-exposed infants in Virginia. In FY16, that number jumped to 1,334, a 21-percent increase in one year.

"I really look forward to what you guys come up with, what we can do," Wexton said.

Sara Schoonover-Martin, executive director of Healthy Families Northern Shenandoah Valley, said her education and support organization is serving about 170 families, more than twice the number it averaged just a few years ago.

"We've seen a strong increase since 2011 of [substance-exposed] infants coming into our program," Schoonover-Martin said.

Dr. Teresa Clawson, medical director of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Winchester Medical Center, said the hospital first noticed an upsurge in substance-exposed infant cases in 2009 and has implemented several programs and measures to mitigate the problem.

Winchester Medical Center's corporate parent, Valley Health, now requires drug screenings of all incoming patients to determine if substance abuse is among the health conditions the hospital must treat.

Expectant mothers who test positive are offered education, support and treatment, Clawson said, and are cared for in a nonjudgmental environment.

Newborns with drug dependencies receive specialized care



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Carrie Redden (right) of toXcel speaks at the Substance Exposed Infants (SEIs) – Barriers to Identification and Treatment Northern Regional Town Hall Meeting on Monday at the Our Health Eagles Community Conference Center. Seated (from left) are panel members Sarah Wingfield, family services supervisor with the Winchester Department of Social Services; Jen Smith, Frederick County DSS family services supervisor; Amanda Judd, Valley Health perinatal substance use disorder liaison; Valley Health's Teresa Clawson, Winchester Medical Center neonatal intensive care unit medical director; and Healthy Families Northern Shenandoah Valley Executive Director Sara Schoonover-Martin.

for their complex physical and emotional needs, Clawson said, including extensive medical treatment in the NICU, extra cuddling for stressed infants suffering from drug withdrawal, and measures to strengthen mother-baby bonds that are often diminished by addiction.

"Now we have mothers coming in who are better engaged with their babies and their own treatment," she said.

While the hospital has made impressive progress, Clawson said more is needed — more money for treatment, more Social Services caseworkers, more access to mental health services, more understanding that addiction is a disease.

Amanda Judd, perinatal substance use disorder liaison with Valley Health, works with pregnant mothers and their families who are battling addictions, guiding them through treatment options and telling them what to expect once their substance-exposed babies are born.

Judd described the multilayered obstacles she faces when assisting mothers coping with ad-

diction — finding transportation to jobs and medical appointments when they've lost their driver's licenses due to legal violations, helping their extended families support and cope with the situation, paying for childcare and legal expenses when they've lost all their money to their addiction, and so on.

"It really is complicated, and it really is big," she said.

Judd said mothers battling addiction need more local mental health treatment options so they can receive ongoing support where they live.

"If we don't give them the skills to stay here and be here, we're really not serving them," Judd said.

Jen Smith and Sarah Wingfield, Family Services supervisors for the Frederick County and Winchester departments of Social Services, respectively, said they need more caseworkers on the front lines to help families struggling with addiction.

"We are seeing mothers that are doing really well when their baby leaves the hospital, but are back [on drugs] in 12 months or less," Smith said.

Wingfield said substance abuse is an underlying factor in most Social Services cases, so more addiction-related training for everyone on staff would be a huge benefit.

Clawson said the key to treating the opioid epidemic and the related rise in substance-exposed infant cases is to understand that addiction is a chronic disease.

Just as you wouldn't give a diabetic two doses of insulin and tell them to stay healthy for the rest of their life, she said, you shouldn't expect an addict to be fully recovered after 30 days of rehab.

"It needs long-term, comprehensive treatment, and the funding needs to be there for it," Clawson said.

The work group investigating barriers to treatments for substance-exposed infants is being overseen by Virginia Secretary of Health and Human Resources William A. Hazel Jr.

It is scheduled to report its findings to Gov. Terry McAuliffe and the state legislature by Dec. 1.

— Contact Brian Brehm at [bbrehm@winchesterstar.com](mailto:bbrehm@winchesterstar.com)