

# ROADS TO RECOVERY

A supplement of *The Independent of Petrolia and Central Lambton*



A new long-term residential program known as the HART Hub is breathing new life into the former SCITS high school on Wellington Street, the same way it is giving Sarnia-Lambton residents with addictions a new beginning.

## Experts have never been so hopeful

The road to recovery from addiction often has multiple lanes, local experts say.

“There is no silver bullet to this crisis,” says Bluewater Health CEO Paula Reaume-Zimmer. “There is no one path.”

But there is growing evidence that combinations of specific strategies have high success rates.

Some 51.2% of Canadians in recovery report reaching a point of stability without relapse, according to the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA).



Matt Barnes, psychotherapist at Southwest Counselling Services.

Even more encouraging, a CCSA national survey found that roughly 75% of people with a significant substance use problem eventually achieve recovery or resolve the issue over their lifetime.

While it’s true that relapse is common – the average person makes two to five serious attempts before achieving long-term stability – the risk of relapse drops significantly over time. After five years of continuous sobriety, the likelihood of using again falls to less than 15%, the CCSA reports.

Local health officials say they are more hopeful than ever thanks to a recent expansion of addiction and recovery services. And a greater effort is being made to ensure quicker and easier access for those struggling with addiction, mental health and homelessness.

Taking the lead on several new initiatives are Bluewater Health and the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Lambton Kent.

“It’s a pivotal moment when someone reaches out for help,” says Donna Morreau, Bluewater Health’s director of mental health and addiction services. “It’s so important to make them feel supported without judgment with that first interaction.”

The hospital’s addiction services are highly respected, says Matt Barnes, a Sarnia-based psychotherapist specializing in trauma therapy at Southwest Counselling Services.

He frequently treats patients with addiction and provides strategies to address it and any trauma that might underlie it.

“Distressing events, especially

in childhood, create low self-esteem and a sense of unsafety in the world,” said Barnes. “It’s difficult to navigate the world if you feel unsafe and chronically stressed.”

“It’s also very difficult to treat trauma (like OCD or PTSD) when someone is in active addiction,” he said, so abstinence is accompanied by counselling.

*It’s difficult to navigate the world if you feel unsafe and chronically stressed.”*

— Matt Barnes

The good news is that the brain can be rewired through healthy relationships and new patterns of living. Groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous provide a sense of safety where people feel supported and encouraged to share their stories.

“There are a lot of therapeutic elements in the 12 steps,” said Barnes. They help instill healthy habits and more positive attitudes.

Private therapists like him offer one-on-one talk therapy for trauma and a growing number offer EMDR therapy (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing). EMDR uses eye movements, tapping or tones

to replace negative emotions around specific memories.

Therapy is also available through Bluewater Health.

“They are the hub for substance abuse,” said Barnes. “They have a lot of connections,



Donna Morreau, Bluewater Health’s director of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

a lot of resources and their services are free.”

Bluewater Health offers detox (withdrawal management), early recovery beds (Ryan’s House), long-term recovery beds (HART Hub), group and individual therapy for people experiencing addictions and their families, outpatient counselling and referrals to treatment centres like Westover.

Three new programs have started through Sarnia’s HART Hub since late 2025.

The provincial government is funding a three-year pilot project called the Homelessness and Addiction Recovery Treatment (HART) Hub in 28 communities across Ontario.

## Addictions can be beaten

Sarnia-Lambton is struggling with an unprecedented addiction crisis, generating plenty of news about overdoses and homelessness.

But sometimes there is recovery.

And it’s anticipated that new government investment in local services and facilities will bring additional relief.

The award-winning team of journalist Cathy Dobson and photographer Glenn Ogilvie set out this past winter to find individuals who have experienced serious alcohol and drug addictions, and who found their own path to recovery. In each case, they despaired yet managed to succeed.

For this series, they generously and bravely shared their stories so that others can learn.

These stories also examine what programs and facilities are currently available in Sarnia-Lambton and what’s still needed.

As a community, it’s important to remember that addiction isn’t always a dead end.

There are success stories.

The people you’ll read about in ROADS TO RECOVERY were motivated to share their journey of recovery for one simple reason – to give hope to others.

This series is possible thanks to a generous grant from the Sarnia Community Foundation and the support of *The Independent of Petrolia and Central Lambton*.

Glenn and Cathy are grateful to the talented Roads to Recovery Committee members who volunteered their time and expertise.

This paper is being distributed free of charge.

Please read it and consider passing it on to a neighbour or friend.

**Stories: Cathy Dobson  
Photos: Glenn Ogilvie  
Design: Kelly Dowswell**

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# Where to find help

- **Alcoholics Anonymous** – 519-337-5211 www.aasarnialambton.com
- **Narcotics Anonymous** – 1-800-573-0920 www.orscna.org
- **Canadian Mental Health Lambton Kent** – 519-337-5411 www.lambtonkent.cmha.ca
- **24/7 Canadian Mental Health Crisis Line** – 519-336-3445 or 1-800-307-4319
- **Drug Addiction Hotline** – 1-800-721-3232
- **Distress Line (Family Counselling Centre)** – 519-336-3000
- **Bluewater Health Community Addiction Support** – outpatient and walk-in services, crisis intervention, counselling, treatment referrals, for people in Sarnia-Lambton who struggle with substance abuse.

519-332-4673 or email possible@bluewaterhealth.ca. Location: Bluewater Health, Level 6, Russell Building, 89 Norman St. Sarnia.

• **Bluewater Health Acute Withdrawal Management** – includes inpatient, 7-bed unit for detox for three – five days. Self referral. Counselling. 24/7 519-464-4487

• **Bluewater Health Ryan’s House Stabilization Facility**, a second-stage withdrawal management facility. Offers 12 beds for men and women over 16 to stay up to one month for early recovery following detox. 306 Exmouth St. Sarnia.

• **HART (Homelessness and Addiction Recovery Treatment) Hub** - recently opened in Sarnia. Two locations. 30-bed residential facility (up to 18 months) considered the third stage for recovery in Sarnia-

Lambton, following detox and Ryan’s House. 275 Wellington St. (formerly SCITS high school).

• **HART Hub drop-in** at 210 Lochiel St. offers recovery support services, showers, laundry, a kitchen, health care referrals, help finding housing, employment, and mental health supports.

• **Suicide Crisis Helpline** – 9-8-8 (call or text)

• **Community Health Integrated Care (CHIC Team)** Daily, on-scene interventions, rapid response, withdrawal management.

• **MobileCare – Community Health Outreach**. Travels across urban and rural S-L with free, walk in services. No appointment required. Primary care, mental health care, addictions services, withdrawal management services

and referrals. 1-866-299-7447. www.sl.mobilecareclinic.ca.

• **Bluewater Methadone Clinic S-L** at 118 Victoria St. in Sarnia. 519-337-5000.

• **Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point Health Services** for mental health and addictions at 6275 Indian Lane, Lambton Shores. 519-786-5647.

• **Youth Wellness Hub** – 190 Front St. for ages 12 – 25 and their families. Crisis/Walk in support, case management, psychotherapy, peer support, addiction services, nurse practitioner, drop in activity groups, fitness activities, family support, housing support and vocational services. 519-491-1466

• **Redpath** (Inn of the Good Shepherd on John St. Sarnia) Addictions treatment using an Indigenous specific model.

Clinical and cultural approaches in a group setting. Call 519-344-1746 ext. 338.

• **Lambton College personal and mental health counselling** – available free to all full and part-time students.

## REGIONAL LONGER TERM RESIDENTIAL REHAB FACILITIES:

- Westover Treatment Centre in Thamesville, call 1-800-721-3232;
- Renascent Addiction Centre in Toronto, call 1-866-232-1212;
- Residence at Homewood and Health Centre in Guelph, call 1-438-258-5460;
- Brentwood Recovery House in Windsor, call 519-253-2441;
- Hope Place in Milton, call 905-878-1120.

## Hopeful:

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Bluewater Health’s CEO Reaume-Zimmer said Sarnia is getting roughly \$6 million in annual funding for a HART Hub. It’s a new approach to recovery that is already paying off, she said.

The hospital opened its component of the HART Hub at the former SCITS high school on Wellington Street in December with 30 long-term beds.

By the end of March, 21 people had been admitted.

Two of them quickly found affordable housing, a few reunited with family, some relapsed, but seven have remained there since it opened in December.

For the first time, Sarnia-Lambton has a safe, supportive long-term facility for those in recovery, said Morreau. “We’re seeing some really good successes early on.”

Individuals who go through acute detox and finish 30 days of early recovery at Ryan’s House, now have the option to stay within their own community at the HART Hub for up to 18 months.

“Now you can see the hope at Ryan’s House when we say there is another option for them once they finish there,” said Morreau.

“This gives them a real opportunity to ground themselves,” said Reaume-Zimmer who was a psychiatric nurse and the integrated VP of Mental Health and Addiction before becoming the hospital’s CEO.

“This is a vulnerable group of people who were often lost



Paula Reaume-Zimmer CEO at Bluewater Health.

because the services to help them were so fragmented,” she said. “Right now, every agency involved is working to make access easier. I am more hopeful than I’ve ever been.

“We’re seeing the impact (the HART Hub model) is having on lives already and the potential there is for many more lives.”

A new low-barrier drop-in centre for vulnerable people has been operating on Lochiel Street since November.

An astonishing 50 people a day are using services there, says Rhonny Doxtator, CEO at CMHA Lambton Kent.

“This is really exciting to me,” she said.

For the first time, vulnerable people can find everything from a shower to a full-on assessment for care just by walking in.

Drop-in services are also for families of vulnerable people to help them explore treatment options for their loved ones, and find support for themselves, Doxtator added.

She agrees that what works best is integrated treatment that addresses addiction as well as physical health, mental health and any underlying trauma.

“We’re learning that hubs work.

People don’t have to bounce around and that’s important if you have someone contemplating coming into care,” Doxtator said. “The hub is proving to be a great example of holistic care.”

Another downtown hub (YWHO) for youth ages 12-25 has operated at 190 Front Street since August 2023.

Also, since 2023, a mobile unit with healthcare professionals has been on the road in Lambton County, offering primary care to people who may not get it otherwise.

The unit has had 2,000 client visits and been extremely

successful, Doxtator said.

The third component of HART Hub funding is to establish more permanent affordable housing. That is Lambton County’s responsibility and is a work in progress. Asked what piece to the puzzle is missing to help Sarnia-Lambton’s homeless and addicted, Barnes, Morreau, Doxtator and Reaume-Zimmer each noted the same thing - housing.

“That’s the biggest question when they’ve done all the hard work,” said Morreau. “That last step is finding somewhere to call home.”

# It's about doing the right thing every day

**D**oug McCurdy beams as he surveys the fresh drywall and new flooring of his partially-renovated living room.

"It feels great to own my own home again. I love working on it myself," he says. "Life is good right now."

McCurdy has been a Sarnia firefighter for 24 years and is the proud father of two boys. He focuses daily on staying healthy, rising early for brisk walks, going to the gym, and checking in regularly with the people who matter to him.

He's worked hard for all the good things in his life.

A few years ago, things were very different. McCurdy, 47, knows how easily his physical and mental health can slip away.

After becoming a professional firefighter, McCurdy lost his parents. His father took his own life in 2005 and his mom died in 2010 from complications brought on by multiple sclerosis.

"As the years went on, I started to go through depression and I didn't understand it," he said. "I had a dream job, I was married, I had two beautiful kids, a nice house.

"I'd come home from work and I was miserable. I couldn't sleep and I didn't know why."

At work, no one talked about mental health in those days, said McCurdy. "There was such a stigma that men don't cry. I felt I'd look weak if I said I was struggling."

He now knows his mental health was impacted by work; the response calls involving suicide, and one involving the murder of two children.

"I was really hurting inside and then when my wife and I separated, I was on my own and I wasn't in a good place," he said. To cope, he turned to alcohol and partying.

In 2014, McCurdy broke his neck playing hockey and became addicted to prescription painkillers. There were certain



Sarnia firefighter Doug McCurdy developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and abused OxyContin following several disturbing work calls. He's seven years clean.

calls he couldn't stop thinking about, and he lied to his doctor saying he was still in pain, even when he wasn't.

"I didn't think I had a problem at that point," he said. "I thought that when my renewal comes up, I just won't go and get it." But he did. Over and over for several years. Eventually, a two-week OxyContin prescription would last just six days.

"I was so addicted and was abusing Oxys. I needed them just to function and I could lie

pretty easily by this point," he said. "I was really struggling with mental health and thinking that maybe my dad did the right thing."

Finally in 2017, he made a life-changing call to his union president.

"I was bawling my eyes out and said I need help. I can't do this anymore," he said. "I'd run out of excuses to my doctor why I needed my prescription early. And I knew I was going to die if I kept going down that path."

McCurdy was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Thankfully, the year before the Ontario government had formally recognized PTSD as a work-related condition for firefighters and other first responders. That made it easier for McCurdy to access Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) benefits for his treatment.

"The province's decision to recognize PTSD as work related has saved countless lives," said McCurdy. "Now (first responders) are able to get the help they need."

He was offered a bed at The Residence at Homewood, a private mental health facility in Guelph that specializes in PTSD and addiction. McCurdy told

himself he was there strictly to stop using Oxy. "I was in denial." He didn't address his PTSD at that point.

"So when I got back to Sarnia, I rushed back to work and kept drinking. I felt embarrassed and didn't deal with my addiction the way I should have."

Drinking led to more partying and to hard drugs. His drug of choice was crack but he tried Fentanyl too. He stopped seeing his psychologist and pushed family and friends away.

A second leave from work was inevitable. He overdosed. This time when he went to rehab it was different. He bought into the entire program, including PTSD therapy.

During those four months of rehab, he lost custody of his kids, was evicted from his apartment and lost most of his belongings when his landlord tossed them on the boulevard. Even his car was repossessed.

"It was a big kick in the ass for me. I realized if I ever wanted my kids again, I'd better get clean and look at the root of the problem for why I was using drugs."

The addicted think no one cares about them, said McCurdy. "People do care, your loved ones, your friends just want you to get better.

"I realized how lucky I was that I had this opportunity to turn my life around and nothing was going to stop me."

That was seven years ago.

He returned from Homewood without a place to live but had the resources to stay in a hotel. Looking back, not being able to return to his old apartment was a blessing, McCurdy said. His old place was the party house and he needed to get away from that crowd.

"I cut out the people from my drug use days," he said. "Five of them are dead now."

Eventually, he regained shared custody of his boys, returned to work in 2020 and started playing hockey and baseball again. He's got a girlfriend who frequently attends 12-step meetings with him.

And in 2024, he was able to buy a house.

"There's one more thing I want to say," he said. "People sometimes say I'm cured. That's not really the way it is. Recovery is a lifelong process that I work at every day.

"If I get complacent I know addiction will sneak up on me, so honesty is a huge part of my life now.

"It's about doing the right thing every day."



Doug McCurdy in his new home that he's renovating.

# Complete honesty keeps her sober these days

**T**wenty counsellors in 12 years. That's how often Monique D'Arcy changed therapists, hoping someone could help with her deep trauma and alcohol addiction.

The Sarnia woman, now 31, entered counselling at the age of 19. Many times it wasn't a good fit.

"Talk therapy on its own never really did it for me," she says.

Ironically, as she became more educated - ultimately earning a Masters in Social Work - the harder it became, said D'Arcy, a social worker the past two years and previously a child protection worker.

She often sabotaged her own therapy out of a need to appear as someone with everything under control, coping well when really she wasn't.

D'Arcy grew up in Sarnia in a low-income home, the youngest of six kids in a blended family. Her father had a disability and her mom worked for minimum wage.

She said she suffered psychological, physical and sexual abuse, starting at the age of seven. It left horrible scars that lead to drinking and self-harm in high school.

Though hurting inside, she put on a brave face. She was an outstanding teen athlete, did well in school, and was the life of the party on weekends.

"The perfectionist in me forced me to persevere through the pain. As long as I looked good on the outside, I thought I was fine," she said.

Occasional drinking in elementary school turned into weekend bingeing in high school. By the time she was at university, D'Arcy was drinking daily, frequently to the point of blacking out.

"I was very good at covering up secrets but I started thinking about suicide around age 15," she said. "I saw psychiatrists in my late teens and I was in and out of the hospital."

"Most people still thought I was doing well. I could hold down a job and I stayed in school." She



Addicts are good at putting on a brave face, even excelling in school as Monique D'Arcy did. Therapy didn't work until she stopped covering up secrets, she says.

gestures to a row of plaques in her living room awarded for sporting excellence.

"The message here is that you truly don't know what people are going through. Even when I was in the worst of my addiction, I would seem like I was doing well and people thought I was in recovery. So they'd be comfortable. My lies kept me sick."

Many times, she'd attend an AA meeting or go into hospital in Sarnia or Windsor to detox for a few days, but her heart wasn't in it. Once she did a 19-day rehab stint at Westover Treatment

Centre in Thamesville.

"I'd be doing it for other people," she said. "And I think that really threw me more into my addiction because going sober for someone else creates so much shame and guilt. I had to do it for myself."

Finally, two years ago in the aftermath of a difficult, despondent Christmas, a moment of clarity struck.

"I thought, I'm either going to die or I'm going to kill myself," she said. "Something just felt different, genuinely different this time. I didn't think it was my time to die. And I had a job to get back to that I truly love. And I didn't want to hurt the people close to me."

"I've seen the impact of suicide and I didn't want to put people through that."

The AA meetings that she'd attended for years started to have more meaning.

Instead of leaving with anger and frustration, she began to make friends and appreciate the support of a 12-step program.

"I did 90 meetings in 90 days. It was sweet hell," she said. "It was hard. The first few weeks, I needed a drink all the time but that obsession finally subsided over time."

Her sister has always been a big support. And people came into D'Arcy's life who she could talk to with honesty.

"For me, AA has been a tremendous support," she said.

Finding a relatable counsellor and being introduced to EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) therapy has also given her a fresh outlook.

EMDR is based on the premise that eye movements can reduce the intensity of disturbing thoughts. It's recognized by the World Health Organization as effective for PTSD and relieves symptoms such as anxiety, depression and panic attacks.

"EMDR takes the emotional charge out of my memories," said D'Arcy. "I'm also learning things like yoga, deep breathing and guided meditation to help me calm my nervous system."

"I'm taking care of myself now."

In the early days of D'Arcy's sobriety, she detoxed at Bluewater Health. She'd been to the hospital's withdrawal management unit numerous times before but always relapsed. This time, she stayed sober.

"I just got genuinely tired of it," she said. Her last drink was Jan. 25, 2024.

D'Arcy also spent time at The Residence at Homewood in Guelph where she worked on the underlying causes of her addiction.

"It was two months being forced to look inward and focus on myself," she said. "In the past,

I've been so committed to not impacting others, to not taking time off - I used to go to detox during Christmas vacation so I wouldn't miss work."

So what's different now?

"I've finally come to terms that this is my life," she said. "It shouldn't be taboo to talk about it. In fact, I want to talk about it. It's my story and telling it keeps me true to myself."

"I'm like an open book... and I have to be honest even if it, unfortunately, upsets other people. That's what's kept me sober this time around."

Being completely honest and having difficult conversations lead to the most growth, she said. "And that's where I'm at. If we don't talk about the crappy parts of life, they just stew."

D'Arcy looks back on the many years she spent deceiving herself and others about the severity of her addiction. She thinks about all the times she would drink in the washroom during a party so no one knew how much she consumed. She thinks about how feeling "like garbage" felt normal. She doesn't want that life anymore.

"I'm finally taking care of myself, exercising and reading a lot, volunteering and getting involved in theatre," she said. "I am finally okay with taking things one day at a time."



Sober for more than two years now, D'Arcy says she attended 90 AA meetings in 90 days. "It was sweet hell."

# Workplace stigma slowly improving

Chris Dobbelaar has an impressive resume. He's a long-time employee at CF Industries in Courtright, gives back to his community daily and is a devoted dad of two.

When he isn't coaching minor hockey in Wallaceburg, the 42-year-old is coaching baseball in Port Lambton where he's also the president of the Gala Days summer festival.

And he's made another, very personal, commitment. Whenever asked to speak publicly about how he found sobriety, he gladly does it.

"If one person makes a choice to ask for help because of something I say, then that's a success," Dobbelaar said.

"I also hope to encourage people to reach out if they see someone struggling. Then tell them you love them and you're willing to listen."

Dobbelaar has been in recovery from alcohol and drug abuse for nine years. Excessive drinking began as a teen growing up on his parent's farm in St. Clair Township. He partied on the weekends like a lot of teens but casual drinking turned into bingeing.

That was especially true if he was stressed by a breakup or some other emotional upset. Alcohol became a way to numb his feelings.

Dobbelaar describes himself

as "a super sensitive, emotional person." But he grew up not expressing those feelings, striving to please his parents and feeling pressure to do well.

"In my 20s, there was a stretch when I used cocaine," he said.

"My true friends who knew me from childhood isolated from me. When I became sober, every one of them came back and they are around all the time now.

"I strongly believe that you are who you hang out with."

Dobbelaar's grandparents died when he was in his 30s. He suppressed his feelings and drank to cope. But alcohol abuse made him feel like he was a disappointment to the people who mattered most. Personal relationships fell apart.

The more he drank and did drugs, the worse he felt. It was a cycle he didn't know how to break.

"Drinking numbs you and cocaine blocks your feelings," he said.

"I'm this emotional person but I was acting like I had no emotions at all." He became suicidal.

Just before Christmas 2016, he took a bigger life insurance policy out.

That's when his parents and sisters intervened, went to his house and urged him to go to

rehab.

It was a classic intervention and it worked.

"I was in a pretty dark spot. I told my dad, 'What took you so long?'" said Dobbelaar, his voice breaking with the tough memories of that day.

"I'd never seen my dad tear up in my life. He said, 'A father should never bury his son, and I don't want to bury you.' That hit me hard."

Having two young children was also a big motivator.

So at age 33, he went to a private residential detox, withdrawal and rehab facility in Port Hope where he had extended one-on-one counselling for the first time.

The program was designed to last 30 days.

Dobbelaar, fully committed, asked to extend his stay to 45 days. He requested homework on the weekend.

"I needed to be 110% (certain) that I was going to be sober, healthy and positive when I left there," he said. "I had a lot of emotions coming out."

Dobbelaar went to as many AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and NA (Narcotics Anonymous) meetings as he could.

He continued attending meetings once he came home but stopped after one year of sobriety.

"The problem is I'm a real people pleaser and I'd be reaching out to people trying to get sober and when they didn't succeed, I felt like it was my fault. It hit me too hard and I had to put up barriers." AA and NA help many people, he added. "But they're not for me."

"I am very, very lucky I have family who supported me, even though I was making decisions that were against how I was raised," he said. "The things I did when I was using still haunt me a lot."

During the early years of recovery, Dobbelaar felt too vulnerable to share his story.

He has worked as a millwright and now a planner at CF Industries for over 20 years. When he went into rehab, Dobbelaar was careful to keep it from his coworkers.

Like many in Sarnia-Lambton, he works in a male dominated industry where discussion of mental health and addiction hasn't been the norm.

"I'm a strong guy working with my hands and my worst fear was what the guys at work would think," he said. "I worried for years that maybe I'd be shunned in the shop and I wouldn't be part of the camaraderie anymore."

But the longer he's in recovery, the more he feels workplace acceptance.



Chris Dobbelaar worried for years about what his colleagues would think but says more workers are talking about mental health and addiction and asking for help.

"The stigma is slowly going away that admitting to an addiction is a bad thing or a sign of weakness," Dobbelaar said. "It actually takes a lot of strength to admit and ask for support or help."

Six years after his last drink, he suggested his employer bring in a guest speaker for Mental Health Awareness Month in May.

Dobbelaar surprised himself by agreeing to be that speaker, along with Matt Barnes of Southwest Counselling in Sarnia.

That first experience sharing his story went better than expected.

Some of his coworkers reached out to him for references and support.

Dobbelaar is convinced that talking publicly about mental health and addiction recovery saves lives.

It also helps him stay accountable.

"I don't ever want to forget how far I've come, what I came through and how hard it was," Dobbelaar said.

"When I talk about it, I always hope to help somebody, but it also helps me."

# Studies and stats show some improvements

Public health officials from a myriad of local organizations and agencies admit there is fairly extensive data reflecting addiction's devastating impacts, and not many statistics about recovery.

However, from what little is available, the stats show that Sarnia-Lambton may be starting to turn the corner on the prevalence and damage of drug abuse.

## ADDICTION

The Lambton Health Unit reports:

- Since 2019, opioid-related deaths in Sarnia-Lambton (S-L) have been higher than the Ontario average.

- The only data available related to how prevalent opioid use is in S-L comes from local physicians. In 2024, 15,833 individuals received opioid prescriptions for pain treatment. Another 1,227 individuals received prescriptions for opioid withdrawal drugs such as methadone and Suboxone.

- The Centre of Addiction & Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto is Canada's largest mental health and teaching hospital. The CAMH says Canada is in the midst of an unprecedented opioid crisis driven largely by the toxicity and unpredictability of fentanyl. An estimated 7,000 Canadians die each year from opioid-related overdoses and many more struggle with addiction.

- Across Ontario and Lambton County, opioid-related deaths surged in 2020. Since then, rates have stabilized but remain high. The unregulated drug supply has become increasingly contaminated, according to the CAMH.

- One in five S-L residents knows someone in their



Donna Morreau, director of mental health and addictions at Bluewater Health, stands where the hospital intends to build a 24-bed facility to combine detox, short term residential support and addictions counselling.

immediate circle who has overdosed, according to Lambton Public Health.

- S-L has more regular and heavy drinkers than the provincial average. In S-L, 65.7% say they are regular drinkers, meaning they drink once a month or more. That compares to 54.4% in Ontario; In S-L, 29% say they are heavy drinkers, meaning they drink four (female) and five (male) drinks on one occasion. That compares to 18.4% heavy drinkers in Ontario. (Canadian Community Health Survey)

- Note that Statistics Canada reports that 19.1% of Canadians aged 12 and older engage in

heavy drinking, making it a growing concern.

- There is little data about demographics. However, we know males in S-L who are aged 20 – 24, are single, smoke and say their mental health is fair to poor, are more likely to drink alcohol.

- 80% of S-L's homeless report difficulties with substance use, according to the Sarnia-Lambton Ontario Health Team. Two-thirds live with mental health challenges.

- In an average year, alcohol use in Sarnia-Lambton is responsible for an estimated 56

deaths, 250 hospitalizations and 2247 emergency department visits for people age 15 and over. This takes into account health conditions such as some cancers, cardiovascular disease, respiratory diseases, digestive conditions, neuropsychiatric conditions, communicable diseases, diabetes, and injuries that are worsened by alcohol consumption.

- The Canadian Mental Health Association's position is that affordable housing for people living with mental health and addictions is a minimum requirement. However, about 300 individuals and families are consistently on the homelessness or housing insecurity wait list. About 1,000 households are on the centralized waiting list.

- A 2021 study indicates S-L needs 2,490 additional affordable housing units. The wait for a rent-g geared-to-income unit is approximately four years, according to Lambton County social services. Updated housing stats are expected later in 2026.

## SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT

- S-L opioid-related deaths are on the decline from 43 recorded in 2020 during the isolation of the pandemic, to 35 in 2024, the most recent year stats are available.

- S-L's decrease in opioid deaths reflects that many local organizations have prioritized work on opioid use, says Jordan

Banninga, manager of health promotions at Lambton Public Health. He is also co-chair of the Lambton Drug & Alcohol Strategy founded in 2023. Initiatives like the distribution of Naloxone kits are working, said Banninga.

- A decrease in opioid-related deaths in S-L, mirrors the national trend.

- S-L Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is responding to significantly fewer calls for opioid poisoning. In 2021, EMS attended 301 such calls. In 2025, EMS attended 194.

- The Ontario Drug Policy Research Network reports the rate of individuals who are prescribed opioid therapy (OAT such as methadone and Suboxone) is higher in Lambton than the province, though this is starting to decline slightly. In 2020, the rate of OAT was 9.83 per 1,000 in Lambton. In 2024, the rate of OAT decreased to 9.01 per 1,000 in Lambton.

- Emergency Department visits for opioid-related poisonings in Lambton is similar to what we see in Ontario and have been declining. 2024: Lambton 76.8 per 100,000; Ontario 77.1 per 100,000, according to Lambton Public Health.

- Seven affordable housing projects are at various stages in S-L. If all are completed, about 250 new affordable units will be available.



Tim Heath, project manager at 210 Lochiel St., a new drop-in centre with comprehensive services for homelessness and addiction.

# Three years sober with hard work and grit

**D**aniel Tye takes a thoughtful pause before explaining where he found the strength to overcome 14 years of drug and alcohol abuse.

It took a certain combination of events to truly commit to recovery.

Uppermost, his mom was getting remarried and he wanted to give her the gift of his sobriety.

Then, by chance, he came across a photo of himself as a little boy and it hit him hard. He wondered where that happy kid had gone.

At the age of 27, he realized he didn't want to die.

And Tye knew that dying was a real possibility after abusing alcohol and drugs from the age of 13.

"The main thing was I didn't want to hurt my family," said Tye, the oldest of three boys who describes his early childhood as really happy.

"I had parents who loved me. Everything was great for a long time," he said. Sitting at his mom's kitchen table in Point Edward, he chooses his words carefully.

He's welcome to live at his mom's now, but that wasn't always the case. There was a time he couldn't be there unsupervised. He'd stolen from her too many times to feed his habit and couldn't be trusted.

That's painful to admit, said Tye, now 34. His mom means the world to him. She is a big part of why he fought for himself and entered recovery.

Tye was a bright, straight A student in Grade 8 at Bridgeview School when he started drinking following the breakdown of his parents' marriage.

"My world came crashing down hard. I had a whole lot of feelings I didn't know how to handle. It did something to me mentally.

"I decided I was done with being a kid. If I did the things adults do, like party, I could go on. I was up for anything."

Staying busy and drunk numbed his emotions.



Daniel Tye started abusing alcohol and opioids in high school and got clean after 14 years. "Be patient with yourself," he says.

Alcohol was augmented by a lot of marijuana. He played football at SCITS and said he played better hung over.

"I had fun for a while. It was a good time. I had friends from all over and I liked to drink on the weekend and needed people to be around me.

"I just didn't know the pain I was in and didn't want to talk about anything."

In Grade 11, Tye tried the addictive painkiller OxyContin.

"It grabbed ahold of me. I wanted that feeling all the time," he said. "I felt like Dan 2.0, like I was enhanced, like a super hero." That led to Fentanyl, which is significantly more potent than OxyContin and has replaced heroin as the most lethal street drug in Ontario.

Despite multiple attempts to stop on his own and interventions from family and friends, the drug use continued. Still, he managed to graduate from high school and became a customs broker.

"I denied I was an addict. I just said I had a problem but it wasn't that bad," he recalled.

Life continued to spiral. He used opiates daily just to feel okay. At his worst, he slept in his car or couch surfed at friends' homes.

Several times, he tried to get away from that lifestyle and went to stay with his father who had

moved to the U.S. But it never stuck. The dream of going to university disappeared.

"I lost a lot of opportunity due to being sick and not wanting to ask for help," he said.

"I was a functioning addict. I could hold a conversation, hold down a job. That's the worst kind of addict. I used every day and had no other human experience outside of that.

"I had zero hope."

But then his mom started making wedding plans.

"So for a wedding gift I was, like, maybe I'll get you your son back. I'll try something different."

Going cold turkey didn't work. "It was terrible. For two weeks, I was so sick, and then I'd fall right back into it," he recalled.

He also tried methadone, a long-lasting synthetic opioid used under medical supervision to replace short-acting opioids like fentanyl or OxyContin. But he didn't want to be addicted to methadone either.

"It's more controlled and it's

better than being on the streets," Tye said. "But withdrawal from that stuff is way worse."

Several days in withdrawal at Bluewater Health's detox unit didn't do it either.

The seven-bed unit opened at the hospital in January 2018 when Tye was beginning to take his recovery seriously.

The unit is designed to help patients with addictions for up to a week. But Tye needed at least two weeks to get the opioids out of his system. He needed long term residential support unavailable in Sarnia until this year.

For months he suffered through a nasty cycle.

"I was so scared," he said.

He'd spend a few days in detox, leave and start abusing immediately. Then he'd try again. Sometimes a detox bed was available. Sometimes not.

"It was hard. They knew me by my first name," he said.

Then one day he came across a photo of himself on display at the Point Edward Arena, just blocks from where he grew up.

It was taken in Grade 4 when he was a class leader for an anti-drug campaign aimed at elementary students.

There he was, dressed in a shirt three sizes too big with "Just Say No" printed across his chest.

"I saw the photo and thought, 'What happened to that kid? Where did that kid go?' I felt a little shift and realized I wanted to live still. I didn't want to die."

His determination grew.

Four months later, he was offered a bed at a 19-day residential program at Westover Treatment Centre in Thamesville where he learned about 12-step programs.

"I left there with 26 days clean and I hadn't been 26 days clean since I was 13," he said. "I thought maybe there's a chance."

He found support at Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and a program called Red Path at The Inn of the Good Shepherd.

He abstained for 17 months until a doctor prescribed opioids following a procedure. Tye found himself right back at it.

"I blew up my life again."

It took three more trips to detox and two more to rehab. All of it was hard work.

But on Feb. 22, Tye celebrated three years of sobriety. He's got full-time employment doing industrial inspection, volunteers as a Big Brother, and attends 12-step programs regularly. He sets goals and feels optimistic about the future.

"I know now that life is not for me. It's been years of learning how to live and letting go of all the stuff I bottled up," he said.

"Recovery is available for everybody. You just have to really be honest with yourself. Be patient with yourself.

"It doesn't happen overnight."



Residential care, AA, NA, and Red Path were all part of Tye's recovery path.

# Grateful to be told she was an addict

Jamie Shilson never would have believed she'd feel such profound peace in sobriety.

Along with a new sense of calm, recovery has given her faith in herself that did not exist during years of alcohol and cocaine addiction.

Now age 44, she spent most of her adult life drinking to the point of blacking out. Shilson says she did not begin to recognize the truth until a girlfriend called her out on her behaviour at her daughter's 15th birthday.

"If I never realized I was an alcoholic, I'd still be living in the dark," she said, relaxing at home where she lives with her son, her daughter and a little Dachshund named Barbara.

"I'm not embarrassed about it. I'm actually grateful I found out I was an alcoholic and an addict because now I have ways to deal with how my mind works and how I see things," she said.

Until 2018, Shilson was mostly what she called a functional alcoholic. She held down a full-time job in retail and was raising her kids. But she never felt well.

"I had low-energy. It was just sad. It was dark. That's how I view it," she said. "When I found you can go to bed happy and wake up happy, I thought, 'Wow, there's another way to live.'

"Now I can just live my life and not drink to cope."

Shilson began drinking as a teenager and often drank with her mom – who also chose recovery three years ago. Their relationship was very co-dependent and Shilson said she lost accountability for herself.

"It was like I fit in with everyone when I drank," she said. "Alcohol and cocaine were so common in my life – and in this community, to be honest – that I didn't think I was any different from everyone else. I didn't recognize when the shift happened and I started drinking and using because I needed to.

"I couldn't function without it. I'd be drinking in the morning, calling Dial-A-Bottle three times a day and having strange people show up with drugs at my house. "Today I look at it and I'm mortified. But that's what happens. You get so lost."

At her worst, Shilson quit her job and collected social assistance even though she was a single mom supporting her family. She felt beyond help.

The last three months before she detoxed were the "bottom of the bottom," she said. "That was when I drank daily and had started using cocaine. I relied on my daughter to do a lot and to take care of my son. I was in a place where I didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore."

Shilson felt unequipped to get into a detox and rehab program. "I had no idea what resources were out there. I thought it



Jamie Shilson, pictured with her dog Barbara. "This life I'm building now is beyond my wildest dreams," she says.

would have been out of town and I thought I'd need money for it," she said.

"I know now that there are lots of different programs locally to help, like withdrawal management at the hospital and 12-step programs. It's basically free therapy.

"All you have to do is show up."

But in the depths of addiction, Shilson didn't have that insight.

So she moved into her girlfriend's basement to detox for a couple of weeks.

"It was all a blur and I was really sick," she said.

"I had hit a wall and didn't know what else to do," she said. "I didn't want to die. But I didn't know how to live." Showing up again for her children was a big factor in her choice to get sober.

She went to therapy after a few weeks, and found a psychiatrist. She also began attending 12-step meetings. Her last drink was on

March 16, 2019.

"I'd like to share that it's very, very hard to get sober. It's a lot easier to stay sober because the farther you get away from that last drink, the more your mental defences build.

"You learn better coping mechanisms and what's important to you. The longer that I'm in recovery, the more confidence I have that I will stay sober."

Later, she attended a one-week co-dependency course at Westover Treatment Centre, about a two-hour drive from Sarnia.

She joined 12-step meetings three or four times a week and remains very involved in the program's service work, which is her way to give back. For instance, she assists with 12-step meetings at Ryan's House, Bluewater Health's transitional facility for people in early recovery.

fulfilling."

Recently, she's also helped with 12-step meetings at the new Hart Hub, the new 18-month transitional housing facility that opened at the former SCITS high school building.

In recovery, she said she's had strong support from her doctor, and from several good friends who drove her to meetings, celebrated her progress and answered the phone when she felt lost.

"They were a really important part of my recovery and still are," she said.

In 2020, Shilson went back to school and completed a two-year executive office admin course.

Lambton College has mental wellness counsellors available to all students on a drop-in basis. Shilson frequently knocked on their door.

"They were pivotal for my first year of sobriety," she said. "I went into that office so many times if I was struggling. They were so great.

"If they weren't there, I don't know if I would have made it through. You have to utilize what's out there."

She graduated with honours and immediately found a full-time job. Shilson is now operations manager for Sarnia psychologist Dr. Virginia South and Associates.

"I love it," she said. "This life I'm building now is beyond my wildest dreams. I know it sounds cheesy, but it's not about the things I have. It's how I feel.

"Before when I drank and in early recovery, I was very busy, always going at a fast pace, complaining about poor me.

"Now I have this peace of mind, security, safety, calmness that I didn't know existed.

"I think it's important to say that I don't believe that you can ever be recovered," she added. "I think you are forever in recovery. Once you're into addiction, you're always an addict.

"It's not just one and done."

"That is a wonderful place," she said. "I've seen some crazy transformations of people going through there. It's very



Counsellors at Lambton College were pivotal during Shilson's first year of sobriety.

# Sobriety tough without safe, affordable housing

**D**oug Waybrant has been sober for 37 years and says he knows a thing or two about it.

“Listen to me,” says the 83-year-old. “I’ve seen it all. I have so many stories, some you would not believe. But they’re true. I know what I’m talking about.”

Waybrant was born in 1943 and grew up in Bright’s Grove with 10 siblings. When his father drank, he hit the kids, Waybrant said.

He first tasted alcohol when he was in Grade 7 behind the Bright’s Grove variety store. He remembers sharing a bottle of sweet Mogen David wine with a buddy.

“I thought, ‘This is fun,’ and I never looked back.”

For decades, Waybrant lived a life of truancy, reform school, and jail. He drank daily, smoked hash oil and became addicted to 222 tablets, an over-the-counter pain reliever containing codeine.

He spent years busking, sometimes managing a temporary job, and says he married twice. He travelled across Canada and was arrested regularly for theft, break-ins and assault.

It was a hard life jammed with misadventure, said Waybrant, but sobriety at age 46 brought some stability. He got his driver’s licence and a job moving furniture. He learned to control his temper and to think before he acted.

He also thought a lot about what helps get people into recovery and what keeps them there.

Government should take more action, he said.

“I want a new federal law that says if you’re drunk and passed out on the sidewalk, you must be taken to detox, not the drunk tank. That’s what saved me,” he said.

And Canada badly needs affordable housing. Without a safe place to live, recovery isn’t possible, said Waybrant.

“You can’t get clean on the street. I’ve slept in parks. I know what it’s like to be dirty and to need a meal. It gives you a bad attitude,” he said. “How the heck are you going to clean up?”

He was living in a rented room in Winnipeg when he went into recovery. Ironically, it was a police officer who helped him, a surprise since Waybrant had always regarded the law as the enemy.

It was 1989 and he had been drinking for 30 years.

“I was right out of it. I’d smashed the window at my place,” he said.

“This young officer said, ‘I’m going to give you a cup of coffee and we’re going to talk and we’re going to make a



Living on the street gives you a bad attitude that’s not conducive to recovery, says Doug Waybrant who kicked his addictions after three decades.

deal.”

Waybrant told him he didn’t want to make a deal. He just wanted to be left alone in a jail cell.

“But he said I wasn’t going there. Instead he took me to the Salvation Army on Winnipeg’s east side, and they put me in the basement there for three months to detox. They took care of me and fed me.”

He embraced the opportunity. “I was tired of having no life at all. I was tired of being in jail.” He hasn’t had a drink or taken a pill since. While in detox, he started attending 12-step programs and proudly wears a ring of medallions around his neck to celebrate his sobriety.

“I’ve done 24 steps, maybe more,” he said.

“I’ve decided I am never going back to pills or drinking or marijuana. It’s a fear I have that I don’t want to go back in jail.” He even quit smoking three years ago.

Waybrant can’t shake the memory of one experience he had at the Winnipeg Salvation Army.

He was invited to walk outside to a dumpster with a volunteer who appeared to be throwing out a tray of sandwiches.

“He said to me, ‘Take a look down inside that dumpster, Doug.’ And I looked and said there’s a bunch of animals in there eating the sandwiches. He said, no, those are humans just like you who will eat anything in that dumpster. If you mess up when you leave here, you’re going to end up in there.”

Waybrant returned to Sarnia several years ago and initially lived in the shelter system.

In 2023, he was offered a

basement room rental for \$700 a month. His \$1000 disability cheque more than covered the cost and he jumped at the chance.

“But it turned out that it wasn’t a good place for me,” he said. “There were people taking drugs in that house and there was a bad bug problem.”

He thought he’d have to return to the street.

But a friend put him in contact with Lambton County

housing and a worker there helped him search for a new room.

“I was told the waiting list for an apartment I can afford is 300 people long. There’s nothing out there to rent,” Waybrant said. He finally found a room in a house on Brock Street with a family that recently moved to a house on Christina Street South and agreed he could move with them.

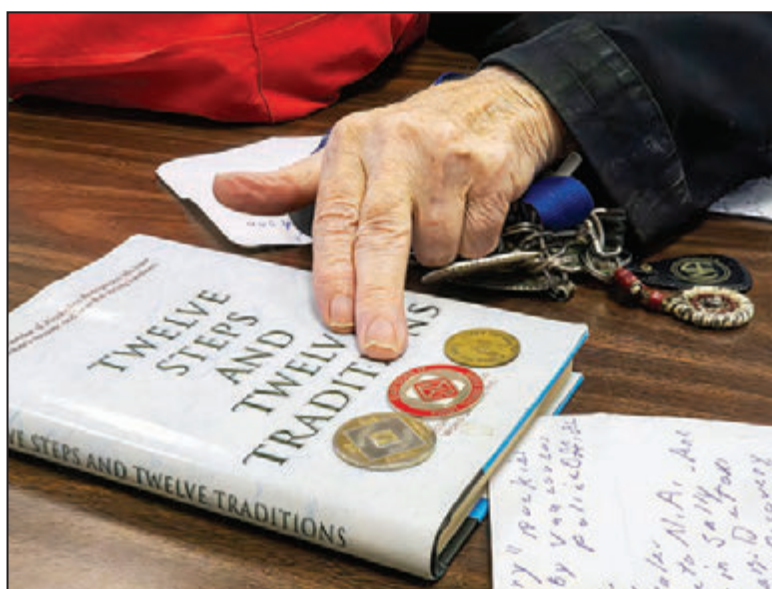
“We’re all trying to make it work,” he said.

“But it’s hard because I’m this old guy and they are young.” He pays \$1,000 a month for room and board and says it’s affordable for him because he has his Ontario Social Assistance cheque to top up his income.

“But here’s my plan. Oh, you’ll love this one,” he said drawing closer. “I like the tiny homes like what they’re doing in London.”

“Not everyone’s going to get along with me. I know that, so I want somewhere that’s independent.”

“I’m 83 years old and I don’t smoke and I don’t drink and I don’t take drugs. I’d just like a place of my own.”



Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous were his lifeline for many years.

# Finding friendship at CONNECT

**Right:** A church service every Sunday evening at CONNECT, a downtown drop-in, attracts a crowd of people living precariously, some in recovery, some not.

**Bottom right:** Doug Waybrant, believes in 12-step programs and has been sober for 37 years.

**Bottom left:** CONNECT volunteer Joanne Edginton serves snacks to Doug Waybrant and some friends. It's a place where community is created.



# Former cop comes clean after addiction led to crime



The misery of withdrawal forced a decision between buying street drugs or going to a methadone clinic. Brad Murray says he chose the clinic and has been in recovery nine years.

**B**rad Murray remembers vividly the day he chose recovery.

He was sitting in a parking lot debating his next move.

He'd used up the last of his Percocet prescription and, with the withdrawal symptoms of an opioid addiction coming on hard, craved more.

His stomach felt empty. Sour. He was restless and sweating.

"I was feeling extremely anxious," he said.

In desperation, he considered his options: Find a drug dealer selling OxyContin, the powerful opioid in Percocets, or go to a walk-in clinic and ask for help.

"I thought to myself, 'When is this going to end?' I knew my addiction was leading me to a really bad place."

He'd never bought drugs on the street before. But he'd been stealing opioids like OxyContin from the evidence locker at the Halton Regional Police Service where he worked as a staff sergeant.

As he sat in his car wrestling with what to do, he thought of an incident that happened on the job about two months earlier.

"I was booking a prisoner and the prisoner was going through significant withdrawal from

fentanyl.

"The only difference between him and me was that I was in a uniform. I was going through withdrawal from Percocets," he said.

The prisoner said he needed to get to a clinic for either Suboxone or methadone to help with withdrawal.

"He educated me," said Murray. "It's so ironic. I spent nine years in the drug unit and knew nothing about addiction. Nothing."

That day in the parking lot, Murray decided to find a clinic. He was 38 years old and a 16-year police veteran who rose quickly in the ranks.

He walked in, admitted to his addiction to Percocet, and said he needed help.

"It wasn't an easy thing to do but it saved my life."

Murray began treatment with Suboxone, a prescribed opiate that reduces withdrawal symptoms and cravings and lowers the risk of an overdose. Two weeks later, his employer secured him a rehab bed at Homewood Health Centre in Guelph where Murray stayed for six weeks.

"A big part of my story is that the first day in treatment at Homewood, they said that when I was done there, I would

not be cured," he said.

"They said you are going to have to go to meetings for the rest of your life and now you are going to have to do 90 meetings in 90 days."

At Homewood, Murray took part in programs specifically for police, military and corrections officers.

It felt safer to do programs with other officers because he felt a certain kind of judgement from those who weren't.

"(Police) are expected to be beyond reproach 100% of the time," he said. "You aren't supposed to fall to addiction. That type of mentality can stop some people from asking for help."

Sitting in group therapy that first day, he admitted it all out loud. It was a relief not to have secrets anymore, Murray said. "I knew I was an addict. But it's an ego thing and I hadn't wanted to admit to it."

"I finally felt like there was some hope."

As a first responder with an addiction, he is far from alone. Multiple studies have found that 14-22% of responders, including firefighters, police officers and paramedics, have reported misusing prescription drugs.

In Murray's case, the first time

he used Percocets was when they were prescribed to ease his pain after surgery in 2008. He had serious knee and shoulder injuries - some occurring on the job - and required 10 surgeries in 15 years.

The drug slowly took control. By 2012 or so he was waking up and popping six pills just to start the day.

He blames no one but himself.

When his prescriptions weren't enough, he began stealing opioids from the police service's drug vault where evidence is stored.

At some point, an internal audit was requested and a seven-month investigation revealed that there had been tampering with about 30 exhibits.

Each case involved prescription or illicit opioids.

In May 2017, Murray was arrested, charged and suspended with pay. A year later, he pleaded guilty to breach of trust while he was head of Halton's Drug and Morality Unit.

He was granted a conditional discharge with three years of probation and 180 hours of community service.

It meant he has no criminal record.

By that time, Murray had

gone to rehab and was in recovery. He chose in 2020 to resign from the Halton Regional Police Service and to start a new career.

His resignation meant he was not subject to discipline under the Police Services Act.

At first, he considered becoming an addictions counsellor.

He also took an architectural technology course. But neither was for him.

Ultimately, he decided he wanted to return to law enforcement. "I knew the only way I could make a difference was to get back into policing... it's my passion. You don't lose that," he said.

Technically, there was nothing stopping him.

"But I knew some people wouldn't be able to look beyond my past, and I totally respect that," he said.

So he became a tobacco enforcement officer with the Brant and Middlesex-London health units.

"I loved being back in the enforcement side of things," he said. He spoke to a number of Ontario police chiefs about work and acknowledged there was fear that he could relapse.

"I totally get that. I realize I have to keep doing the work," he said.

In 2023 he was surprised by a call from Sarnia Chief Derek Davis. The two had worked in Halton at the same time but weren't friends, Murray said.

Davis told Murray about a new civilian position being created in Sarnia and suggested he apply.

"I have to tell you, that was the turning point in my life," said Murray. "I hadn't lost hope. I knew someone just had to give me a chance."

He was hired in 2024 by Sarnia Police Service as a crime analyst.

It had been nearly seven years after his arrest and he was seven years into his recovery.

Six months later, he became manager of crime and intelligence in Sarnia.

"The first day here, I sat down with my colleagues and told them my story," he said.

"I wanted to own up to the elephant in the room. I wanted to be honest. It's a story that follows you, but I have a sense of hope and pride that I got through the tough times."

"It's very easy in addiction to blame others...but the solution comes from within. I put the work in. I've done the education. I made the amends."

"And it's easier now," he said. "It's all been in the newspaper already. I don't have any secrets anymore. That's my super power."

# Hope lives inside a 12-step meeting

**H**i, I'm Wayne and I'm an alcoholic."

A friendly round of "Hi Wayne" fills the room as a Friday night Alcoholics Anonymous meeting gets underway in Sarnia.

About 70 people have gathered at a church hall for an open AA meeting, which, unlike most AA meetings, is open to everyone to hear the speaker and discover the premise of the 12-step program.

Alcoholics Anonymous has deep roots in Sarnia-Lambton, known as District 14. Since 1946, there's been dozens of weekly meetings in area church halls, hospitals, and community rooms. In recent years, virtual meetings have added even more accessibility.

*I've been 10 years in AA and it's been the best 10 years of my life.*

— Wayne S

When people talk candidly about recovery, nine times out of 10, the program was an integral part of their success.

Wayne S. is tonight's speaker. Anonymity is a way to encourage all alcoholics to seek support without shame or embarrassment.

"I've been 10 years in AA and it's been the best 10 years of my life," says Wayne who is a burly 77 year old with a handsome face weathered by years of hard living.

Growing up in Wallaceburg he was extremely aggressive, he says. His parents shared their good values, but he wasn't receptive. "I was the black sheep, I guess."

Drinking and anti-social behaviour began at age 13 and it landed him in prison for the better part of 30 years.

"I had no zest for life, no goals. When you have a bad attitude, you radiate that into society. I guess you can call it bad karma," he says.

"The truth is that if you want to act right, you'll be treated right."

He experienced homelessness, stole from others, and was a "helpless drunk."

The fact that he turned to AA for help at age 66 is a miracle, he says.

"I was finally honest with myself and I finally knew what I wanted," Wayne explains. "I found support here and I found the support of a good woman."

From a stage at the front of the hall, Wayne looks out at the crowd of men and women. They are from every walk of life. They listen intently, hoping to learn from this man who beat all odds and got sober.

"To new people here, I have this to say: Give yourself a chance," he says. "Be good to yourself and be good to other people."

"There is so much addiction out there today and it's painful to watch. I see people hard-pressed to have the basics in life. They are homeless. They are hurting.

"We should be a hell of a lot more sympathetic," he says. "If it wasn't for AA, I'd be out on the street. And now, I wouldn't trade my life for anything."

Following his talk, Wayne is thanked by another AA member named Randy.

"There are miracles in this group and you're one of them," he tells Wayne.

AA meetings take place day and night in every community in Sarnia-Lambton.

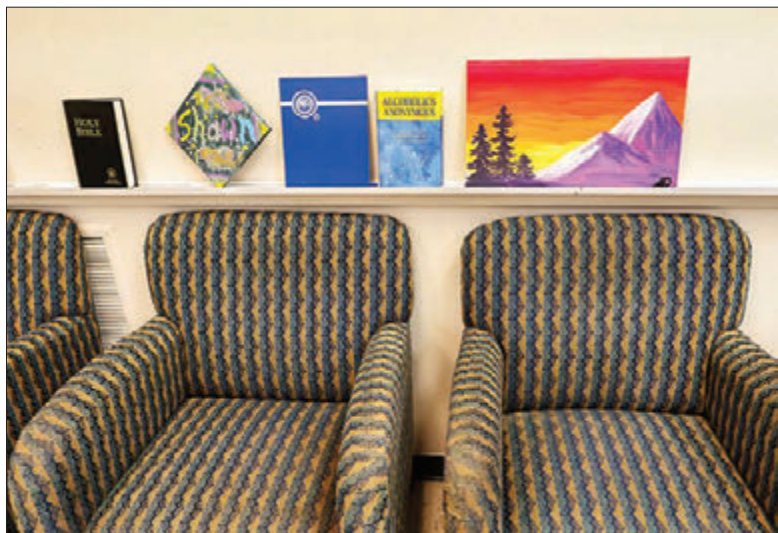
There's no way to quantify how many attend but people in recovery frequently go to several meetings a day if they need it. Some attend sporadically.

AA's concept of alcoholics supporting alcoholics is introduced to people in early recovery, so meetings are offered on-site at hospitals and recovery facilities like the HART Hub and Ryan's House.

Often, Alcoholics Anonymous and its sister organization, NA (Narcotics Anonymous), are the only support available



Stories of struggle and recovery are shared from behind a podium at 12-step meetings held every day of the week across Sarnia-Lambton.



The new residential HART Hub hosts AA meetings regularly in a common room.

in Sarnia-Lambton between early recovery and access to a therapist or a bed in a residential rehab facility.

For Wayne S., AA was the only way to sobriety.

He says he spent time in hospital, he went to Westover Treatment Centre, and he tried going cold turkey on his own. But nothing worked until he joined the program.

AA was founded in Ohio in 1935 by two men who formed a support group in order to get sober. Today, more than two million members worldwide in 180 nations attend the free AA

meetings, which are run entirely by lay people sharing their experience, strength and hope.

Many studies have examined the success of the AA model, and one from the Stanford School of Medicine was particularly comprehensive. Researchers evaluated 35 studies and the outcomes for 10,000 participants. They concluded that AA was almost always found to be more effective than psychotherapy for achieving abstinence.

Stanford researcher Keith Humphreys said AA's combination of emotional

support and practical tips from others with lived experience appears to be what works.

During his talk in the church hall, Wayne S. told a story of meeting a man at a previous meeting who confided that he was going to kill himself.

"He came into that meeting and heard me speak and later told me that something I said made him feel like he'd be okay."

"I don't get emotional often," says Wayne. "But I do when I talk about that. When I see people turn their lives around, it's the greatest gift I've received."