

Contact: MaryWade Burnside
Public Information Officer
Monongalia County Health Department
Morgantown, WV 26505
(304) 598-5152 | www.monchd.org
MaryWade.Burnside@wv.gov



For Immediate Release

Michael McCawley of MUSHROOM, brings his knowledge to Mon Co. QRT

MORGANTOWN, WV (April 27, 2022) — On a windy early spring day, a group of nursing and public health students, along with members of the Monongalia County Quick Response Team (QRT), gather on a hilltop at Bartlett Housing Solutions, toting supplies that include underwear, socks, snacks and COVID-19 vaccines.

Michael McCawley, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Department of Occupational and Environmental Health Sciences at West Virginia University’s School of Public Health, assembles the volunteers for instructions before they get to work meeting with unsheltered individuals.

“Our calling card is underwear and socks,” he said as members of the group known as Multidisciplinary UnSheltered Homeless Relief Outreach in Morgantown (MUSHROOM), prepare to interact with and find ways to help individuals staying at Bartlett House in a building that once housed the Ramada Inn hotel, now called Hazel’s House of Hope.

McCawley tells the group that living on the streets can be a recipe for disaster, and that he often sees situations in which someone with a medical condition, such as a tumor, might not get it checked out until it’s too late.

“If we had seen that two years ago, we could have treated it,” McCawley said. “Now the chance of survival is zero.”

That’s why McCawley notes that one of the most important things the volunteers can give these individuals is their time and attention, to listen to them and connect with them.

“When we go out, we are ... humanity. That’s what we do. Giving the people we meet time and attention is the street definition of humanity.”

McCawley has been involved with MUSHROOM since about a year and a half after its inception in 2005. He’s also a member of the Monongalia County QRT, a multi-group organization created through funding obtained by Monongalia County Health Department that works to reduce opioid use and overdoses in the community.

Information McCawley gets as a QRT member has helped him when he makes his MUSHROOM rounds.

“We see people with drug issues, and some who have mental issues,” McCawley said. “Sometimes, the drugs are just self-treatment for the folks using them.”

As a QRT member, for instance, he can learn about the presence in the community of fentanyl, an opioid that is often mixed with other drugs. Fentanyl poses a very high risk of overdose, especially when individuals are unaware they are ingesting it.

“I’m telling people, ‘You should be careful. It will kill you if you are not careful.’ You want to prevent that overdose, that death, by education and making people aware.”

On this evening, as MUSHROOM members set about to give COVID shots and figure out who needs a new vaccination card, one volunteer asks McCawley if he has any naloxone, also known as Narcan, which reverses the effect of an opioid overdose. McCawley gathers a kit from a bag and hands it over.

If socks and underwear are MUSHROOM’s calling card, naloxone is a distinguishing feature of the QRT, which distributes doses and also provides training on the medication. In fact, the Monongalia County QRT will be holding its second Save a Life Day at 11 stations around Monongalia County from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, May 7, for anyone who wants to learn how to administer it.

Joe Klass, chief of operations at MCHD Threat Preparedness and a founding member of the QRT, actually went out on MUSHROOM rounds as one of McCawley’s students in 2013. It’s how he met his girlfriend, Dr. Katie Hill, who also serves on the QRT.

Klass, along with members of West Virginia Sober Living, provides naloxone training in the community. Since their involvement with the QRT, Klass and Dr. Hill have started going back out on MUSHROOM rounds, which take place every other week.

“Now that MUSHROOM is part of the QRT, it has allowed other organizations to collaborate and provide their expertise to support the objectives of MUSHROOM,” Klass said. “It also gives the QRT additional information about what is happening on the street.”

Brittany Irick, the Monongalia County QRT coordinator, got a master’s degree from the WVU School of Public Health after she was encouraged by McCawley, who was her employer at a job she worked during her undergraduate years.

“It’s great that we can have him involved in this,” Irick said of McCawley. “We’ve been able to offer COVID vaccines and give out Narcan. Dr. McCawley has been really receptive to our input on any sort of services or resources we can provide to the target population during MUSHROOM rounds. It allows MCHD to offer new services and resources to these individuals.”

Recently, members of WV PEERS, who have lived experience with substance misuse and serve as peer recovery coaches (PRCs), also started going out on rounds. During their first time, in mid-April, they were able to engage 10 individuals, according to Russell Wyatt of the QRT and WV PEERS, which is part of West Virginia Sober Living.

“It went well,” Wyatt said. “We were able to hand out preventative supplies for opioid overdoses to help combat the epidemic.”

On this day, Klass organizes COVID vaccinations. Along with a nursing student and fellow MCHD Threat Prep employee Colton Cooper, who helps round up anyone who wants to get a shot, the group gets six jabs into arms at this location.

“MUSHROOM rounds do a lot of good not only for the people we serve, but also for the students,” Klass said. “It provides experience interacting with a population that students likely do not have a lot of experience interacting with, and it also helps build their medical assessment skills.”

Founded by a group of medical students, one of whom is McCawley’s daughter, Dr. Sarah McCawley Taylor, MUSHROOM was modeled after a Pittsburgh program called Operation Safety Net.

According to information on its WVU’s School of Medicine web page, MUSHROOM “brings together medical, nursing, dental, social work and other health professional volunteers on “street rounds.” ... “We go by foot to those places where we are needed most:

along the rivers and creeks, down the back alleys of downtown, and under the bridges. Our goal is to reach out to those most marginalized from society.”

The number of unsheltered individuals in Monongalia County fluctuates. According to Rachael Coen, the chief programs officer for the West Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness (WVCEH), a count in January found 44 individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness and 51 in shelters in Monongalia County.

While McCawley brings a different perspective to the Monongalia County QRT, he acknowledges that the contacts he has made during the meetings helps him as well, such as with members from the WVCEH.

“The QRT is very useful as a proverbial matchmaker,” he said. “It brings together eligible parties with shared interests and personalizes the exchange of social niceties and the establishment of familiarity. It then allows nature to take its course and often supports the unions that occur.”

Back at Bartlett, McCawley lends an ear to a woman whose accent seems to confirm that she comes from a different part of the country, one with which McCawley is familiar.

“That’s how these conversations start,” McCawley said in a separate interview. “Where are you from, what is your name, where are you staying, do you have shelter, what is your situation like?”

Sometimes, getting that far isn’t possible, however. “We’ve sown up some wounds on the street and we’ve called for an ambulance a couple of times.”

Volunteers also make referrals to Morgantown’s free clinic, Milan Puskar Health Right, in an effort to connect the unsheltered to steadier health care, which can also lead to an introduction to other services.

On a recent night of rounds, McCawley said, some dental students came along. “We were able to talk to folks about getting their teeth taken care of. And if you go to Health Right, there is a social worker who will tell you how to get health benefits.”

After about an hour at Bartlett, it’s time to pack up and head downtown to look for more unsheltered individuals to help.

“It’s an interesting thing,” McCawley said. “At the end of rounds, I ask the new people how they feel after doing rounds. When we are leaving, we feel good.

“And people thank us profusely for handing them underwear. It’s like giving someone an expensive Christmas gift for \$1.98, and they are as happy and grateful as anyone I’ve ever seen.”

For up-to-date information on health and wellness in Monongalia County, check out monchd.org and follow the health department on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD and on Instagram at #wvmchd.

—30—