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## **For Immediate Release**

### ***Save a Life Day: “I would not be here without the administration of naloxone”***

**MORGANTOWN, WV (Sept. 20, 2021)** — Sam Shawish used substances and got clean a few times, once for more than two years. But a little over a year ago, on Sept. 4, 2020, six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, “I had some things happen to me and I made the decision to use again.”

After Shawish missed a work meeting and also an appointment to give a client a ride, Russell Wyatt, a peer recovery coach (PRC) with West Virginia Sober Living, went to Shawish’s apartment and found him unresponsive, with shallow breathing. It’s estimated that he had been out for quite a while and was in cardiac arrest.

Wyatt, who is also a member of the Monongalia County Quick Response Team (QRT), put his training into action, giving Shawish two 4-mg naloxone doses three minutes apart. Naloxone reverses the effects of an opioid overdose by kicking opioid molecules off brain receptors.

Following procedure, Wyatt had already called 911, and soon, Jason D. Morgan, a Monongalia County sheriff’s deputy and a fellow QRT member, showed up and gave Shawish additional doses, as did paramedics.

Shawish’s breathing improved although he did not wake up, and he was taken to the hospital.

When he finally came to, Shawish, now 28, had additional challenges to embrace other than a renewed path to recovery.

“My brain was impacted and I had to rebuild my function,” he said. “I had issues making a sandwich.” He also had to re-learn how to use his legs.

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For someone who had struggled with substance use disorder, this added extra layers to Shawish's fight for life.

"I actually couldn't see myself restarting it," he said of working toward recovery again. "I had done it so many times. And all of those things hitting me at one time, it was overwhelming.

"Eventually, I told myself that I did have a choice." Because of his lengthy hospital stay, he was no longer physically dependent on the drugs. "The decision to make the choice to dust myself off or just tap out was totally mine."

He chose the former, working a 12-step program, completing inpatient rehabilitation at Jacob's Ladder treatment facility in Aurora in Preston County, undergoing intensive outpatient therapy and allowing himself to ask for help and not remain isolated, which would have been easier because of the pandemic.

"I would pick up the phone and call people and tell them when I'm struggling," he said. The availability of telehealth also contributed to his success.

More than a year later, Shawish works at Valley HealthCare System as a recovery coach.

And this Saturday, he will be one of the volunteers working with QRT members to teach naloxone administration to anyone who wants it. Save a Life Day will take place from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at 13 different locations in Monongalia County.

"It's been great to see Sam make a comeback and for him to have naloxone available to him to give him an opportunity at another chance to recover," said Wyatt, who has been coordinating volunteers and sponsors for the event.

"As far as Save a Life Day, this is a perfect example of why we need to carry naloxone and use it and have it in the hands of the general public along with individuals with substance use disorder. If the medication is available to save somebody's life, I feel we have a responsibility to use it."

There are other examples of when having naloxone and knowing how to administer it is important, Wyatt noted.

“We’ve seen situations in which children get into a medicine cabinet or their parents’ stash, or when people with memory issues have trouble with their prescription dosages,” he added.

These are people’s family members, as Wyatt well knows from a personal experience that occurred just recently.

“As an example, my 18-year-old son was experimenting with what he thought was cocaine for the first time. It ended up being fentanyl.”

Fentanyl is a synthetic drug that is more powerful than other substances and often takes individuals by surprise when it’s surreptitiously added to or substituted for something else.

Wyatt’s son overdosed and was rushed to the emergency department. “If it weren’t for naloxone, my son wouldn’t be here anymore.”

Save a Life Day locations include five McDonald’s restaurants in Morgantown: Sabraton, Westover, Star City, Pierpont, Suncrest Towne Centre; the WVU Mountainlair Green and the WVU Student Rec Center; Morgantown Farmers Market Pavilion; Pierpont Landing Pharmacy; Star City Fire & EMS; the 7-Eleven on Mason-Dixon Highway in Blacksville; Woodland United Methodist Church on the Mileground and Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church on Kingwood Pike.

Participants can just walk up to a table at any of these locations to receive the training. Naloxone is applied in the nasal passages as a nose spray and is easy for anyone to administer. Naloxone training has been a key component of the Monongalia County QRT, which formed in the spring of 2019.

Funded through grants obtained by Monongalia County Health Department, the Monongalia County QRT is a collaboration among public health, PRCs, first responders and other partners dedicated to providing immediate and longer-term help to those struggling with substance use disorder.

The goal is for PRCs is to reach someone who has overdosed within 24 to 72 hours, whether at the hospital, at their home or by telephone. They work with individuals to get them services and, even if not right away, treatment, which sometimes requires time and the cultivation of a relationship before someone is ready.

During Save a Life Day, participants will not only receive the five-to-seven minute naloxone training, but will also be sent home with two 2-mg doses so they will be able to respond to real-life situations.

The idea of not helping someone out, no matter how many times the individual has overdosed, does not make sense to Wyatt or Shawish.

“We don’t get to decide how many attempts it takes,” Wyatt said.

Added Shawish: “It’s like saying, ‘Why give someone medication to someone with schizophrenia or who struggles with mental health. It’s available and why not?’”

And a year later, Shawish is living proof that someone who does recover can then assist others and pass along the gift of the ability to save someone’s life.

“Today, I sponsor people again,” he said. “I’ve gone from being somebody who couldn’t stop using for six hours at a time to over a year of sobriety. I couldn’t have done it without the support.”

For up-to-date information on health and wellness in Monongalia County, check out [monchd.org](http://monchd.org) and follow the health department on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD and on Instagram at #wvmchd. Learn more about the Monongalia County QRT at [monchd.org/mon-co-qrt.html](http://monchd.org/mon-co-qrt.html) and follow the Facebook page @MonCoQRT.

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