

# Working to Heal Stigma



*“I think the best way to mitigate the impact of addiction is to work together to heal the stigma that our patients and clients deal with on a daily basis.”*

*- Jessica Ross, LPN, Alliance Recovery/Decatur*

“Two of my very close family members died of an overdose,” says Jessica Ross of Alliance Recovery in Decatur. “When I came to this field, I didn’t know much about medication-assisted treatment. I just knew I needed to make a difference.”

*Medication assisted therapy is cited by both the CDC and the National Institute on Drug Abuse as an effective treatment for opioid addiction. One reason that opioid addiction is so difficult to overcome is that the body becomes accustomed to the drug very quickly. From that point, any decrease in dosage can cause severe withdrawal symptoms. To simply feel normal – not euphoric, but free from withdrawal – individuals who may have begun by using a drug prescribed for pain can turn to street drugs. Provided in a controlled, therapeutic environment, medication-assisted treatment interrupts that cycle by relieving withdrawal symptoms (without the “high”).*

*With other chronic diseases, like diabetes, medication is the norm. But addiction still tends to be viewed as a character defect - a moral failure - rather than a disease.*

In the wake of the opioid epidemic, the census is up at Alliance. With the increase in clients, HIV testing is up 43%. This quarter one previously diagnosed HIV-positive client was linked to treatment and 6 more received ongoing support to remain in care.

“We provide recovery-based treatment with a side of medication,” says Ross. “A lot of people are very sick when they walk in because we require clients to be in withdrawal to enter treatment. The first week or two can be pretty overwhelming for them. During that time, it’s as though we haven’t really met them. And then, a few weeks into treatment, their personality begins to emerge; we start to see the actual person behind the disease of addiction. People have the opportunity to address physical health needs - including testing for HIV and hepatitis C. They begin to see a way out of the darkness. Some relapse; they may leave and come back and leave again. But when they’re ready, they start to flourish. I’ve seen people get their lives back, get their families back. Recovery is such a beautiful adventure.” ■