

# Confronting IDU in North Georgia

“Most of our patients are very open about their drug use. They might say, ‘I shared needles two years ago; could I possibly be infected?’ ”

Jeanette Loudermilk, Pittard Clinic, Toccoa

**Throughout Georgia**, injection drug use is putting people at risk for blood borne viruses - notably HIV and HCV.

Less than 60 miles from Towns County - one of four Georgia counties identified as highly vulnerable to rapid dissemination of HIV or HCV infection among persons who inject drugs - is Toccoa, population 8,941.

Jeanette Loudermilk of Pittard MAT Clinic in Toccoa serves a high percentage of clients with a history of injection drug use. Drug use is not a new problem, but in light of the outbreak in southern Indiana, Jeanette sees HIV prevention as a crucial part of recovery. She is working harder than ever to help clients learn their status for HIV and HCV and to get clients who test positive into care.

Of particular concern are individuals who relapse. She estimates that about half of those who visit the clinic stay in recovery and half relapse. “Maybe they come in because of a traumatic event. They want to change but aren’t emotionally ready to be in recovery, so they leave before we have an opportunity to help them stabilize.” She views this not as a failure, but as a stage in a process. “That first impression they receive of being treated with respect and the realization that care is always available has created a path for them to return and get into recovery.”



Jeanette Loudermilk, Pittard Clinic, Toccoa

“People with a substance use diagnosis will always have a substance use diagnosis,” says Jeanette. “But recovery is possible. It’s real. One of the services we offer to patients is a chance to learn their HIV status. That’s a scary thing for people who have risk behaviors. But if they test positive, they can get treatment. Each hurdle they get over is a success. And each success opens the door to new possibilities. It’s rewarding to be able to support someone’s recovery. To see clients get to a place where they’re able to function well and contribute to society.”