

Rescue Squad Sees Sharp Rise in Opioid Overdose Calls

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Western Albemarle Rescue Squad Chief Kostas Alibertis. Photo: Lisa Martin.

Western Albemarle Rescue Squad (WARS) Chief Kostas Alibertis is raising the alarm about a strong upswing in opioid overdoses in the Crozet area. "We've seen a dramatic, notable increase in the use and abuse of drugs in recent months, and it is not marijuana," he said. "Overdoses from primarily opioids are happening here in our Crozet growth area at an increasing rate."

Alibertis, who's served with the squad for almost 40 years, said WARS had 2,100 calls in 2022 (an average of almost six per day), an increase of 5-10% from the year before. That rate of increase is continuing into this year, and overdoses are a bigger part of the growth than other types of emergencies.

"It's hard to pull exact statistics because of the way we code emergency calls in our database," he said. "For instance, if you overdose and you're not breathing, your call is dispatched as a cardiac arrest, not as an overdose. So, it's difficult to give precise numbers, but I can say that in all of 2019 we had a handful of overdose calls, and now we're seeing multiple each month. We run these calls, we feel the jump."

The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) collects data from hospitals that report on multiple causes of emergency department (ED) visits and deaths, so overdose cases are easier to identify. The VDH data shows a sharp uptick, as statewide deaths from opioid overdoses increased from 1,059 in 2018 to 2,223 in 2021, a 110% rise. During the same period, Virginia ED visits for opioids increased by 44%. In Albemarle County, opioid-related ED visits rose from 118 in 2020 to 184 in 2022, and the data from early 2023 extrapolates to an even higher total (240) for this year.

Alibertis described a few different types of overdose victims the squad encounters. "There's the person who intentionally tries to harm themselves, perhaps in a call for help; there's the person who's experimenting with drugs and it gets out of hand; and there's the chronic user," he said. He has particularly noticed a higher level of "acuity"—a measure of the degree of sickness of the victim—in overdose calls lately. "We've had cases recently where we were called to the same location within a few days of each other related to an overdose. These are the kinds of things we haven't seen before."

Over the last 12 months, opioid overdose hospital ED visits in Virginia split about 60/40 between males and females, with 55% white and 35% Black patients. While victims aged 25 to 44 made up the largest block of ED visits, 45 to 64-year-olds were close behind. "In broad terms for what we see, some people are probably more recreational users, where others are doing it more for psychological reasons, like coping with stress or loneliness," said Alibertis.

"We see people who have opioids because it's a prescription and they overdo it, and others who buy it from dealers," he said. "There is more of a methamphetamine problem in the Shenandoah Valley, but here we're pretty affluent and there is ready access to opioids. The pandemic hit and everybody was isolated, they were stuck inside and lost some coping and social skills. Now we're at the point where people either want to fit in [to the social scene], or they want to escape."

An overdose can present itself to rescuers in multiple ways—from just not feeling well, to having a psychological emergency, to being in a car wreck, to having a heart attack—and squad members have to tease out the root causes by asking questions. Alibertis said most people will admit their drug use to rescuers. "We tell them that if we treat you and you hide something from us, we could accidentally do harm. We always share with folks that this [interaction] is private and confidential, but we need to know what you took so we don't make you worse."

Overdoses can vary widely in how long they take to be fatal. "You can take an overdose of acetaminophen, which can cause liver failure and eventual death if not treated," said Alibertis. "You can take an overdose of heroin and die in the next five minutes. So it all depends on the drug, how much was taken, whether it was mixed with other drugs or alcohol. Opioids are depressants and so is alcohol, so if you mix them, they can depress your respiratory function, and you just stop breathing."

The rescue squad brings about 95% of the people it treats to the hospital Emergency Department, but occasionally some refuse. "Sometimes somebody has not overdosed to the point of being impaired and they still retain their right to refuse. There's a population of people who are used to getting high and don't want to go to the hospital, but someone else had called us because they were passed out. In the last six months we've seen a dramatic increase in calls that were dispatched as cardiac arrests but were caused by overdosing. In most of those cases, we were able to reverse

things, but not all of them."

The squad is trained in the use of Naloxone (sold as Narcan)—a medication that can reverse an overdose from opioids—and in July it will be available over-the-counter, though Alibertis is not sure that means a reduction in calls. "The thing about treatments like Narcan is that the reversal agent usually lasts a shorter period of time than the insulting agent," he said. "So Narcan might make you wake up and feel better, but then the Narcan wears off and the drug that you have in your system reintroduces itself."

While all overdose cases are dispiriting to witness, Alibertis said that some of the most disturbing involve parents of small children. "That's depressing to me because that person is responsible for a life that can't yet be responsible for itself," he said. In many cases there are spillover effects of drug overdoses such as broken families and increased crime. "When you're addicted to drugs and don't have money, that can lead to other types of criminal activity." Law enforcement organizations report that crimes related to opioid addiction can range from petty theft to labor and sex trafficking to murder.

Overdose calls can differ in other ways from emergencies involving car accidents or falls, because they may expose the rescue crew to significantly more danger. "People can get very angry—it's the attitude of, you just spent your last paycheck on getting high and we took that away," said Alibertis. "Folks are under the influence, and they lack good judgment. The golden rule is, you cannot have a rational conversation with an irrational individual. They can lash out, they could have a weapon, could be combative, and whenever you enter a situation where someone has lost rationality, you're at risk."

In scenarios where the squad has reason to suspect danger on a call, their protocol is to wait for the police to arrive at the scene and go in first. The Albemarle County Police Department has begun carrying Narcan as well, which helps overdose victims. "The police can sometimes get to an

emergency scene before we can, just based on where they are when the call comes in, and they can administer Narcan," said Alibertis. "It's great—the sooner the better in these situations."

Overdose calls often result from situations where people have opted to put themselves into a hazardous situation intentionally, as opposed to an accidental injury or hazard. When asked if overdoses are more frustrating to squad members than other kinds of calls, Alibertis demurred. "It's still an emergency in the truest sense," he said. "An overdose can kill you, and the most important thing to us is that people call 911. We want them to call us because there's a chance that our intervention will make a difference in their life. We have over a hundred members [volunteering at the Rescue Squad] and we don't know when or how we're going to make that impact, but we know it happens."

Beyond alerting the community that opioid abuse is on the rise here, Alibertis wants citizens to pay attention to those around them who may be susceptible to drug overdose. "Usually, people are using drugs to fill a void or a gap, to either distract themselves from reality or to find pleasure that they're not finding in their everyday lives," he said. "If somebody sees that, and does something, they might be able to fill that that gap. Once a person becomes addicted, then it's harder, but you never know what intervention can turn it around."

Alibertis encourages anyone interested in the work that WARS does to volunteer. "We would love to see more community involvement in the Rescue Squad," he said. "UVA's hospital and its student population are a great resource, but we'd love more local people to get involved. An EMT class takes just a semester to do, an ambulance driving class is 16 hours." Created in 1978, the all-volunteer squad could always use more hands. "We have a concurrency rate of 20%, which means that out of every fifth call that goes out, we'll get a second call before that crew frees up," said Alibertis.

"When people get involved, it really ties us to the community, and it gives us

the ability to surge," he said. "Surge means that if people are members of the rescue squad and something really bad happens—a plane flies into the side of a mountain, a bus drives into a tractor trailer, a train hits a trash truck—people can come out and help. When you run EMS calls, you help your neighbor and you become vested in your community" he said, "and one of the things Crozet has always been about is everybody helping their neighbor. That's what we want."

Magnolia Rose Supports Survivors with Storefront

January 6, 2023



Magnolia Rose founders Kristan Crummett-Dollar (left) and Jessica Garcia at their new gift shop in Waynesboro. Photo: Lisa Martin.

Magnolia Rose has opened a storefront on Main Street in Waynesboro that its founders hope will further their vision of hope and healing for victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking in the Shenandoah Valley. Launched in 2020, the nonprofit organization is dedicated to providing opportunities for emotional, economic, and personal empowerment to survivors, and the new store and building will serve that goal in multiple ways.

"This was a too-good-to-be-true opportunity for us," said Magnolia Rose co-founder and director Kristan Crummett-Dollar, who also directs the Victim-Witness Assistance Program for the city of Waynesboro. When an investor bought several downtown buildings and offered space to Magnolia Rose for an apartment and storefront, the agency jumped at the chance. "Having a storefront will help raise awareness and also attract the volunteers that we need to come and help."

Crummett-Dollar and co-founder Jessica Garcia took over the space of the Blue Moon Gallery, along with much of the store's inventory, and the prior owner is allowing Magnolia Rose to sell those items and keep a percentage of the revenue. "Most of the people who work in the store are volunteers," said Crummett-Dollar, "so the only ones we pay are the survivors that come and work here." The store sells locally owned and made items such as art, clothing, gifts, and small plants, and all proceeds are used to fund direct services for survivors.

The agency's website (magnoliarose.org) accepts donations and will soon feature items made by trafficking survivors in its online store. The organization also manages an emergency apartment, called the Magnolia Rose Cottage, for victims identified by law enforcement. The apartment provides two-week stays for victims, allowing enough time for medical care, forensic interviews, and identifying the appropriate trauma-informed programs for survivors. "It's a temporary solution to help get them immediate care and to get them off any drugs, because a trafficking shelter will not take them until they are clean," said Crummett-Dollar.

In the spring, the two partners plan to open a drop-in center in another part of the building behind the store. "It's meant for teenage girls at risk, who may be walking the streets or don't have the greatest home life and don't have a safe place to hang out, as well as for survivors," said Crummett-Dollar. Beyond providing safety and company, the center will offer space for life-skills classes, support groups, counseling, and healing programs, as well as

a place for community agencies to connect with survivors.

A Dearth of Resources

Crummett-Dollar and Garcia, who is a victim advocate in the Virginia Attorney General's Office, see their work with Magnolia Rose as filling a critical void. "We help all over the state, but we try to concentrate in the Shenandoah Valley because there are no services for human trafficking victims here—none," said Crummett-Dollar. "The closest shelter we have that will accept girls outside of their jurisdiction is Latisha's House in Williamsburg."

"The toughest part has been funding," said Garcia. "We don't have state grants, federal funding, nothing. We have one local community foundation that helped us to get a \$1,000 grant just to get started, but everything else really has been the [Waynesboro] community coming through for us. Our hope is that the state can give us a line in the budget [for victim support], and we plan to work with our state delegates for that." Much of the funding to establish the store and apartment has come from Magnolia Rose's founders' own pockets, or has been raised during time off from their regular jobs.

"Jessica and I have been going around doing some speaking engagements at churches and smaller groups, and we're seeing some donations come in, which is fantastic," said Crummett-Dollar. "New Creation in Harrisonburg paid the December rent for the apartment. We're hoping to get businesses, or twelve different people, to say 'I'll pay a month's rent at the storefront or the apartment,' and that would really help."

Not only are victim witness programs facing cuts, but surrounding jurisdictions are losing facilities. Farmville closed its domestic violence shelter recently, and funding for new facilities often tips toward already-established organizations used by police task forces in bigger cities. "To

start a new one, the state wants to see the last several years of your books and [victim assistance] statistics," said Crummett-Dollar. "I understand that, but how are we supposed to find placements for these girls? I'm now having to place girls in trafficking shelters out of state."

A Benevolent Landlord

Tina Raybon is the Waynesboro resident who invested in the buildings that now house Magnolia Rose's storefront, apartment, and future drop-in center, and she says it's been a miraculous journey. "I have to say, this is totally a God thing," said Raybon. "I wasn't looking for this building. But I knew the person who owned the Blue Moon Gallery and she approached me about buying the building from her, and we signed a contract last fall. So, I was thinking about what could go in there, and just then I was introduced to Kristan and Jess, who were looking for a storefront on Main Street because they wanted to bring awareness to human trafficking and they wanted it to be very visible."

Raybon knows that she could have leased out the prime space with its lovely front windows for a large sum, but that wasn't what her gut was telling her. "It just happened," she said. "It wasn't me buying the building and having a grand idea that I could put a nonprofit there, I truly think God said, 'If I get this building into her hands, then it will work out that [Magnolia Rose] can have it for this purpose.'"

Since then, the former stay-at-home mom and homemaker has found herself awed by the work Crummett-Dollar and Garcia are doing. "I was not very familiar with trafficking until now," said Raybon. "You hear about it but have no idea how it really happens. And Kristan and Jess just put their whole selves into helping—by donating some of the stuff for the apartment from their own homes and in so many other ways." She has found herself drawn to the cause, even transformed in some ways.

"I'm not on the board or anything, but I find myself over at the store all the time," she said. "I feel like God just put this there, for me, for them, for what He's going to accomplish through this. I've met FBI agents, and congressional delegates, and sometimes I wonder what am I supposed to do next? I've always been a careful person, not wanting to start until I know what's going to happen, but watching Kristan and Jess has made me adopt a little of their attitude of 'Okay, let's get it done.' And if that's not it, we'll back up and try again."

There for Them

Magnolia Rose has worked with more than 100 trafficking victims since 2020, many of whom are not referred by police or hotlines, but instead find the organization via social media or word of mouth. "Often they bypass the police department because of issues they don't want to report, but yet they still need help," said Crummett-Dollar. While few cases end in prosecutions because traffickers are so elusive, Magnolia Rose's priority is to ensure that victims know they can be counted on for help.

The stories are harrowing, from a late-night rescue of a victim outside a gang stronghold to the discovery that victims were actually being trafficked out of a supposed shelter in Virginia Beach. The partners' resolve, however, is crystal clear. "It's never going to be said about us that we didn't respond," said Crummett-Dollar.

The two victim advocates acknowledge both the highs and the low points of trying to help women and girls who are being trafficked. "We know that it can take many attempts at getting out of that life to actually do it," said Crummett-Dollar. "But even if they do relapse, we know they'll come back for help, they know our cell phone numbers by heart, and they'll call us from whatever state they're in and know that we're here for them."

Albemarle School Administrator Lawsuit Heard in U.S. District Court

January 6, 2023



United States Court House.

The U.S. District Court for the Western District of Virginia heard arguments on December 15 in the case of Emily Mais v. Albemarle County School Board, originally filed in April of this year. Mais is a former assistant principal at Agnor-Hurt Elementary School in Albemarle County and has taught for 17 years both here and elsewhere. She claims that she experienced severe and pervasive racial harassment at the hands of Agnor-Hurt staff during and after a required anti-racism teacher training session at the school, and the harassment ultimately compelled her to resign from her job to preserve her mental health.

In the complaint, Mais contends that over the course of a required “Courageous Conversations about Race” teacher training in 2021, she became disturbed by what she felt were racially discriminatory training materials, and that she fielded similar concerns from other teachers. During the final session, Mais inadvertently used the phrase “colored people” instead of “people of color,” and immediately and repeatedly apologized to all present. She was then verbally attacked by teacher’s aide Sheila Avery, who called her an “old racist” and said she did not accept the apology.

Following the training incident, Mais claims that she was subjected to months of increasingly hostile and vulgar attacks (such as being openly called a “two-faced white racist b—”) from staff members, as well as physical intimidation, and that multiple requests for help from school and division administrators were ignored. Mais was asked to (and did) apologize again in several other meetings and mediation sessions, culminating in a mandatory meeting of all the school’s teachers, where she was required to read an apology statement that had been significantly abridged by school division staff. After Mais’s statement, Avery was invited to speak and demanded that teachers choose a side—hers or Mais’s. Mais submitted her resignation at the end of August.

Defense Arguments

In the December hearing, attorney Jeremy Capps, representing the Albemarle County School Board, defended a motion to dismiss the complaint on the basis that citizens generally cannot sue any level of government—including school districts or their employees. Capps said that under Virginia’s constitution, the government and its agencies are immune from such claims under a doctrine called “sovereign immunity,” and any waiver of sovereign immunity has to be explicit, and can only be granted by the government.

“There is no mechanism in Virginia law by which the plaintiff could pursue a monetary remedy for violation of the constitution,” said Capps, adding that

retaliation is not covered as discrimination by the Virginia Human Rights Commission. "The real issue in this case is whether the plaintiff has alleged enough for a 'hostile work environment' under Title Seven." Mais claims that the harassment made it impossible for her to continue working at the school, so the School Board was willfully negligent and "constructively discharged" her, in violation of her constitutional rights.

In arguing against the constructive discharge claim, Capps said that Mais was "only" called a "two-faced white racist b—" twice after the training session, according to the complaint. "She didn't like the fact that she was asked to apologize, but that doesn't make a hostile work environment," he said. Neither side disputes that Mais immediately apologized for her misstatement, and reiterated her apology several times.

Capps also acknowledged that now-retired Bernard Hairston, who was at the time Assistant Superintendent for School Community Empowerment, described the anti-racism policy to Mais in a mediation meeting where Avery was present, and in that context he said, "You're either on the bus or you're not. You are either a racist or an anti-racist." Capps also noted that then-Director of Educator Quality Daphne Keiser said it was inappropriate for Hairston to have conducted a mediation meeting without any human resources persons present.

However, none of this was enough to create a situation that could amount to constructive discharge, said Capps. "She cannot use her own objections to the policy, or her own offensive statements that cause conflict within the workplace between coworkers, as the basis for a hostile work environment claim," he said. "It's just not enough."

Judge Norman K. Moon followed up by asking what would be enough. "I mean, when are you going to let up?" said Moon. "At what point will [the punishment] be enough? What amount is the [appropriate] public punishment of someone for wrongdoing?"

"But that's the problem with the allegations in this complaint," replied Capps, "because she didn't let it play out. She resigned before she gave the [public, all-staff] apology."

"That's my point," said Moon. "Is it normal that one would be required to stand before that body and apologize? You know, the [original] comment wasn't to that body. Is that an overreaction [by division administrators]? Is that why Human Resources said they should have been involved in mediation, because they might not have required that type of thing? If she should be disciplined for what she said, was this the appropriate discipline?"

Capps suggested again that Mais should have endured the hostile treatment for longer to see how it might have "played out." "She short-cutted that process by resigning before the apology, so we couldn't watch that play out—this might be a completely different situation if [instead] she had gone into that meeting, had not resigned, made an apology, and the treatment continued and Miss Avery refused to accept her apology. But that's not what's alleged, and that didn't happen because she resigned before it could happen."

Plaintiff Arguments

Mais's counsel, Hal Frampton of Alliance Defending Freedom, said that Mais was "subjected by the school district to an environment infused with racial hostility from top to bottom," and asked the court to look at five elements to determine sufficiently severe pervasive hostility: (1) the content of the Courageous Conversations curriculum, which "trades in crude racial stereotypes," (2) racist comments made by Hairston, including his "comparison of white parents to slave owners who had raped his mother and sister and beaten him and were now telling him not to talk about it," (3) the implementation of the curriculum at Agnor-Hurt Elementary, in which white participants were repeatedly told that their perspectives were not welcome, (4) the district's treatment of Mais in contrast to how it handled the behavior

of her co-workers, who cursed at her and intimidated her friends and physically blocked them from visiting her office, with no repercussions, and (5) the refusal of seven different school division officials, including Principal Michael Irani, to intervene during the ongoing racial harassment of Mais by co-workers from June 11 to her last day on September 9;

“School administrators allowed teacher’s aides who were people of color to attend the all-faculty public apology meeting to be seated in the front row, dressed in black t-shirts and camo pants, to intimidate [Mais], while specifically not inviting white teacher’s aides,” said Frampton. “They allowed a teacher’s aide who had harassed Mais to essentially give a rebuttal after Mais’ apology, where she continued to call Mais a racist.”

Regarding the immunity claims, Frampton said, “It’s unlawful for an employer to discriminate against employees and employment agencies, to discriminate because of engaging in protected activity.” He also argued that Mais was acting in some ways outside the scope of her employment “by reaching out affirmatively, raising these issues many times in places when she’s absolutely not required to do so, speaking as a citizen on a matter of public concern.” This latter approach may trigger an exception from sovereign immunity in Virginia.

Judge Moon did not indicate when he would make a decision on the motion to dismiss.