

STATE

Appalachian Regional Commission grants \$1.5M to Pennsylvania to help substance users re-enter workforce

Story by Ashley Murray/Post-Gazette Washington Bureau

Photo courtesy of POWER

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WASHINGTON — During a week when the nation hit a grim milestone of deaths from drug overdoses, a joint federal and state commission awarded more than \$5 million in grants to Appalachian states, including four to Pennsylvania, aimed at helping those in recovery re-enter the workforce and sustain a better quality of life.

Just over \$1.5 million from the Appalachian Regional Commission will go to multiple Pennsylvania agencies that will identify barriers to the job market and provide employment counseling, among other services, for those with substance use disorder as well as train recovery specialists.



“If we talk about really creating a recovery ecosystem, ideally it means that everyone understands the impact of substances and how substance use on individuals,” said Rosa Davis, CEO of Pennsylvania Organization for Women in Early Recovery, or POWER, one of three agencies in the Commonwealth that received \$500,000.

The Pittsburgh-based organization, which offers services ranging from in-patient rehab to intensive outpatient programs, plans to use the money to hire an intake coordinator, a family therapist and a case manager dedicated to collaborating with workforce development agencies in the southwestern Pennsylvania region.

“By expanding the relationships with workforce organizations, we want to bring something to the table as well. So we are going to be training and offering consultation to our partners so they begin to better understand addiction and how they might need to tailor their programs to address this population,” said Ms. Davis, speaking at a Tuesday virtual announcement of the Investments Supporting Partnerships In Recovery Ecosystems, or INSPIRE, grants, along with Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf and the commission’s federal co-chair Gayle Manchin, wife of Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

“The substance use disorder crisis isn’t only a health and family issue — it’s a workforce issue,” Ms. Manchin said. “The devastating impacts of this crisis also have severe economic impacts, keeping many Appalachians of prime working age from participating in the labor force and contributing to the region’s economic growth.”

Both states have been hit hard by the opioid epidemic. Pennsylvania saw a record number of overdose deaths in 2017 that began to dip following aggressive efforts to combat the issue. However, the number has been steadily climbing, with advocates and health officials pointing to the pandemic and the prevalence of fentanyl, a synthetic opioid 80 to 100 times more powerful than morphine.

Just last year in Allegheny County, the vast majority of the 689 people who died from overdoses — more than 84% — had some type of fentanyl or related substances in their systems, a review of overdose statistics in June by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette found.

“This has been a problem and it's something we know, because of our experience, we can do something about [by] working through really good organizations like the ones who won the INSPIRE grants,” Mr. Wolf said. “People with substance abuse disorders and their families actually deserve better than us wringing our hands and saying I'm sorry for the problems that you're facing.”

The grants were announced just a day before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention posted new data revealing that a startling 100,000 Americans have died of drug overdoses in the 12-month period leading up to April — a never-before-seen milestone that health officials attribute to the pandemic and a more dangerous drug supply.

POWER plans to work with partners including PA Women Work, the Squirrel Hill Health Center, the Trade Institute of Pittsburgh and the Mon Valley Institute, among others in the 14-county region to reach nearly 300 people in recovery with job training as well as treatment and family support services, according to the grant summary.

Favor and Voices of Recovery Western Pennsylvania and the Workforce Solutions of North Central Pennsylvania were also both awarded \$500,000. The Crawford County Drug and Alcohol Executive Committee was awarded \$48,604.



The grants were among the second round of such funds issued by the commission, which is a federal agency that works with the governors of 13 states in the Appalachian region. [DOWNLOAD THE APP \(HTTPS://PGNEWSLIDE.COM/\)](https://pgnewsslide.com/)

The Post-Gazette's Joel Jacobs and The Associated Press contributed reporting.

Pictured: Rosa Davis, CEO of Pennsylvania Organization for Women in Early Recovery (POWER).



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