

## **The Power of Primary Care**

Little Rivers Healthcare in northeastern Vermont serves a cluster of remote towns that exemplify the Vermont adage that “you can’t get there from here.” These are small, economically stressed towns that have been hit hard by the opiate crisis. People from more populated areas might be surprised at the scope of healthcare that is provided at Little Rivers: complete health care from birth to geriatrics, including complex chronic medical problems and mental health. You can get all your prenatal care here and have your delivery with your family doctor. Skin biopsies, ultrasounds, joint injections, and substance abuse treatment are all part of our usual office days. My husband even had his chainsaw injury stitched up here last summer.

Last year, a young man I’ll call Nate was found unconscious and taken by friends to the nearby hospital, having overdosed on opiates. He was revived with two doses of Narcan and was discharged. I don’t know for certain if he was offered any resources for treating substance abuse, but there is no mention of it in his Emergency Room note. Almost immediately, his two friends thought he still wasn’t acting right, but he wouldn’t go back to the hospital. One of the friends was enrolled in Little Rivers’ Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) program, and so they brought him to us.

Normally new patients have to fill out paperwork and get prior records before being offered an appointment. However, our receptionist recognized that Nate looked poorly, and he was seen immediately. He was disoriented and lethargic. A MAT nurse sat with him to watch his vital signs to see if he needed more Narcan. While talking with her, Nate admitted that he’d intentionally taken much more than his usual amount of opiates, hoping he would die. The behavioral health counselor from our MAT team was able to come see him immediately. He was monitored over the next several hours in our office until his condition stabilized. He was enrolled in our MAT program that day and started on suboxone the next.

Nate has continued in our program and is doing well. Through Little Rivers, he sees a psychiatric nurse practitioner, a behavioral health counselor, a licensed drug and alcohol counselor and a family doctor. More recently, MAT support groups have resumed. These include Accuwellness (an acupuncture technique) and Tai Chi for people in recovery. He got his diagnosis of bipolar disorder here and has begun treatment. All of this is within walking distance of his home. Nate has been back at work for months now, and recently passed his commercial driver’s test.

This young man, actively overdosing and actively suicidal, got emergent medical and mental health services and immediate follow up care in our office on a walk-in basis. Emergency rooms or specialists would not have provided that for him. He came to us because his friend knew and trusted the providers in our MAT program. This is the power of comprehensive primary care that’s integrated into the community.

**Fay Homan, MD**  
**Little Rivers Healthcare**  
**11/25/2021**