70 Million S1 E6 Transcript:
In One State, an Opioid Crisis Led Police to Start an Angel Program

In Massachusetts, Gloucester PD started an "angel program" to help people in the grip of opioid addiction get help. Instead of arresting people for opioid-related crimes, police directed them to treatment programs and resources. The angel program eventually grew into PAARI, the Police Assisted Addiction Recovery Initiative. It's now a national program. Reporter Maria Murriel visits the original program to see how it all works.

Mitzi: Hey, 70 Million listeners, we want to learn more about you. We'd love it if you could take a few minutes to fill out our listener survey. We want to know how you listen to 70 Million, what you love and what we could work on. You can find the survey at 70millionpod.com/survey. I took it and was done in about 5 minutes. Just go to 70millionpod.com/survey. And thanks in advance for helping us out.

Musical interlude.

70 million adults in the United States have a criminal record. I'm Mitzi Miller and this is 70 Million -- an open-source podcast about people, and communities, taking on the broken criminal justice system. This season, we'll chronicle how local jails compound the problem, and what residents are doing about it.

Montage: "Here I am with the judges and attorneys and, you know, police officers..."

"You can have the most beautiful resume and they're still going to label you as a felon."

"I wanted to be able to, to dig in, roll up my sleeves and figure out what could be done about this issue."

"You're not letting us be human, like, you're not letting us just be regular girls."

"For 20 years all I heard was shut up inmate. And now all of a sudden I have a voice."

Mitzi: For a long time, the U.S. government has been waging a war on drugs. The preferred solution to widespread drug abuse has been to arrest people. The Drug Policy Alliance says in 2016, 1.2 million Americans were arrested solely for possession charges.

People battling addiction can end up in jail for all sorts of other crimes -- like stealing or so-called “quality of life” crimes related to homelessness. Going through withdrawal behind bars can be brutal, sometimes even fatal. If they get out, those battling addiction might go right back to using. Which can also end in death.

Drug overdose fatalities in the U.S. have been rising over the last two decades, with the sharpest increase due to opioids. In today’s episode, we’re going to Massachusetts, where fatal overdoses were more at than twice the national rate in 2016.

Around that time, one police department in Gloucester decided to stop arresting addicts -- and try to get them treatment instead. They’ve inspired other police departments all over the country to start looking at addiction as a public health issue rather than a crime. From the North Shore of Massachusetts Bay, reporter Maria Murriel has our story.

Maria: It’s a sunny day in seaside Gloucester, Massachusetts. Downtown, there’s seagulls everywhere, circling the docks where -- while the restaurants serve 25-dollar lobster rolls -- the fishermen unload their catch. You can’t miss this contrast throughout the city. Gloucester’s working class heroes, the fishermen, are immortalized with an 8-foot bronze statue across from oceanfront properties that are worth millions.

This little peninsula -- just an hour northeast of Boston -- contains multitudes. In a city of 30,000 people, there are vacation homes, beaches, a real-life castle -- and also public housing and homeless shelters. Tito Rodriguez spends his workdays visiting some of those shelters and walking around town -- rain, shine, or snow.

Tito: You ok there? Staying outta trouble?

Maria: Tito’s pushing 70, but you’d never guess it. He’s fit and wears sporty clothes to make his rounds, looking for people who might need his help.

Tito: You leaning into a car, that don’t look good, brother.

Maria: He runs into a man he knows who’s leaning into the passenger window of a car. The man is a musician, a guitarist, and he’s on the addiction recovery path.

Tito: What you got in the bag? What you got in the bag?

Maria: The guitarist is holding a pharmacy bag, so Tito looks inside to make sure there’s nothing sketchy in it. Nothing the guitarist shouldn’t be taking.

Tito: That’s all in your name though, right?

Maria: Then he leans into the car himself, and introduces himself to the driver. She tells him she’s in recovery also. And that she’s doing well. When he says goodbye, Tito makes sure they know that they can call him if they’re ever not doing well.

In Gloucester, opioid-related deaths have more than doubled since 2013. It’s a fishing town, so one theory says the chronic pain from hard, physical labor leads fishermen to depend on painkillers and eventually slide into addiction. That’s not Tito’s story, but he *is* in recovery. He’s been clean for a long time. And he keeps a sobriety counter on his phone marking exactly how long.

Tito: Thirty six years, two months, five days and two hours and 26 minutes.

Maria: Wow, that’s a long time, Tito, congratulations.

Tito: Yeah. But it's only a day at a time, you know, it really is. It truly is. ’Cause you know, I can, tonight given certain circumstances, you know, I can have a needle in my arm or I can be at a bar drinking Jack Daniels, you know.

Maria: This is a truth Tito keeps in mind all day in his everyday life and it guides his work, too. He’s a care advocate with the Police Assisted Addiction Recovery Initiative, PAARI. He works with the Gloucester Police Department to help them keep addicts out of jail and guide them toward treatment instead.

He's not a social worker, but a lot of what he does is really similar. He spends most of his time outside the office, getting to know people. On the streets, in shelters. He knows the people there, so he chats with them, plays a board game, whatever. He just makes sure he’s around when someone is ready to ask for help getting clean. And he also collaborates directly with police officers.

Tito: One of the things we do is post-overdose calls.

Maria: If someone overdoses, the police will come. The first priority is keeping that person alive. Later, they come back with Tito to check on them, and explain what options they have for treatment.

Tito: We'll go the next day or we'll go within 48 hours. I prefer them personally -- me, my style is that they wear the uniform. It's important for them to see the other side of the police officer and the fact that they're wearing the uniform and are in a helping posture, you know, it sort of sticks for me.

Maria: Tito does put in some desk time in the mornings, updating a database of open beds at detoxes and shelters. And sometimes, he’ll get a call like this one.

Phone rings.

Tito: Hello, yes it is, who's this? How you doing?

Maria: A woman calls him because her relative wants to get clean.

Tito: Right. So she's using right now, right?

Maria: They live in another town, but Tito refers her to a program there that could help.

Tito: Yeah, no, no, but they can initiate it and they can start to work with her and if they want...if she's willing to work --

Maria: He makes it clear that it'll be hard, but there are ways she can get support from people like him.

Tito: Maybe we should just ease her into it and maybe think about medically assisted, Vivitrol or something to slow her down. If she's using. If she's using. Well, we'll talk.

Maria: Tito didn't know this person. Someone referred her to him, saying this is a guy who could help her relative find treatment. It's something he's been doing for decades -- even before it was his job.

TIto: I'll help anybody. And I'll help. And I'll meet them at their level. I don't care, you know, I go into the weeds. I'll go anywhere. They tell me someone's in crisis 'cause I know what it's like. I know what it's like to be at that last day when you want to die. In my case, I just didn't have the courage to kill myself, but I wanted to die. I know what that feels like.

Maria: Now, Tito's married. He has two kids. He works for PAARI, he coaches basketball. But before he got to this point in his life, he had it rough. When he says he'll go into the weeds, he means literal weeds. As in helping people who are living outside. In a park, in the woods, like he was at one point in the '80s.

Tito: I was living in Cambridge. I was doing OK. But then I became homeless and it was, uh, my skid to oblivion was fast. It just, I woke up in Fresh Pond, there where the reservoir is, and I was living -- apparently I was living there for two months, but I was just drinking and I was like, at that time I was like, I think I referred myself to as a chemical engineer. I would just take, consuming anything that would alter my state of consciousness. I wasn't aware. I didn't even know how I got there and I just woke up, looked up at -- I was living in the bushes in Fresh Pond, looked up and just said, 'if somebody's out there, point me the right way because I'm going to die.' And the next day I was in detox.

Maria: Tito got help -- from another guy who was living in the bushes. And he's been paying it forward ever since, getting addicts on the road to clean, one person at a time.

That's exactly the idea behind PAARI, which actually started 3 years ago as something called the Angel Program here at the Gloucester Police Department. The original idea was this: Imagine you're addicted to opioids. You're at the point where you wanna get clean, so you walk into the police station to turn in your drugs. No questions asked. No possession charges. No jail time. And then, the cops help you get into a detox program. According to Gloucester Police Chief John McCarthy, it didn't go exactly as planned.

John: Well, nobody turned in their drugs.

Maria: But that doesn't mean the program didn't work. People still came in, said they wanted to get clean, and the police would help get them the overdose antidote Narcan, or a bed in a detox or whatever they needed.

John: This program was started by my predecessor. And I think it started a conversation around the country that hadn't been heard before, that law enforcement in general, we're going to try to get people help as opposed to arresting them.

Maria: McCarthy's talking about the former chief, Leonard Campanello, who founded the Angel Program that became PAARI. Campanello left the department in 2016 amidst unrelated allegations of misconduct, but the Angel Program was his brainchild.

John: One of the catchphrases that he used at the time was 'we can't arrest ourselves out of this problem.'

Maria: Three years ago, Campanello announced the Angel Program on Facebook, and declared that his department would make revolutionary changes to the way they treated the disease of addiction. That post blew up. Millions of people saw that this police department in Massachusetts was offering help instead of arresting people. Addicts ready for treatment came to Gloucester from all over the country. And the little police department was overwhelmed.

John: I think we put somewhere around 500 through in the first year, a year and a half of the program.

Maria: But these days, Gloucester PD doesn't have to take as many out of towners anymore. The PAARI model has spread to over 400 jurisdictions. Now there's a nationwide network of police departments helping addicts get treatment. And Gloucester has become a leader in the movement to reframe the way addiction is policed. Chief McCarthy says his officers undergo mental health training to

understand addiction as a disease rather than a crime. As PAARI's founder said, it's not just about arresting people anymore.

John: A lot of police officers were resistant in the beginning. You know, it's a different way of approaching this problem and it's what a lot of us -- you look at me and I'm in my 38th year here, so it's -- can you teach old dogs new tricks? And we pretty much successfully have.

Musical interlude.

Maria: Of the hundreds of police departments that have now adopted the PAARI model, Arlington, a suburb of Boston, was the second to do so. Arlington Police Chief Fred Ryan says they had an average of one fatal overdose per month in 2015.

Fred: And as, you know, as the bodies continued to turn up, we started to ask ourselves, you know, what could we be doing differently? Clearly arrest to incarceration was not the solution. And you know, this notion of a war on drugs for the prior four or five decades had failed miserably and brought us to this epidemic that we're in today.

Maria: Chief Ryan is the most openly critical active law enforcement officer I've spoken to. He says, straight up, the punitive, law and order, war on drugs approach of the '80s, '90s and even today -- was a mistake.

Fred: It was bad policy. This is a part of the problem with policing in America, is we don't -- we don't effectively go back and look at our flaws and our errors and learn from them. You know, we're an institution like any other. We're not perfect. We made a lot of bad mistakes.

Maria: And he also openly acknowledges a history of discrimination in policing.

Fred: There's no question that there's disparate treatment. It's disparate treatment socioeconomically, there's racial disparate treatment in the criminal justice system. And you know, I've heard colleagues in law enforcement say, you know, our officers don't engage in racial profiling. And I say: 'In the 1980s as a young cop, I was taught to racially profile.' This was the policy. I was taught by the United States Department of Justice during the so-called drug and addiction program in the '80s to racially profile. To sit here and say that it never happened is completely untruthful.

Maria: With this hindsight, Chief Ryan says he wants to reframe not just how we think about opioid addicts, but how we think about crime in general. He says he now runs a restorative justice precinct.

Fred: The criminal justice system in many ways reinforces bad behavior and sets people up for failure. In the restorative setting, we ask: was there harm? Who's responsible for the harm? And how then do we repair that harm?

Maria: Chief Ryan wants to spread this philosophy to the rest of the country. He co-authored a guide for the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health. It's called the 10 Standards of Care and it helps police better respond to the opioid crisis in their own backyards. One of the standards? Prevent disease outbreaks by collaborating with community agencies to give people care.

Back in Gloucester, that's what the High Risk Task Force does. It's a collaboration between public and private organizations working to decrease and prevent substance abuse. Gloucester Police Chief McCarthy says forming the taskforce was just the logical solution to the problems they were facing.

John: It came about very truthfully because of a lot of the people that we deal with were putting a strain on like the fire service, the emergency room, the police department, and we sat down and said, how can we, you know, lessen the strain on these departments. And that's how it initiated. And it evolved into, well, a way to lessen the strain on these departments is to try to get these people help and to try to make it so that they're not a daily customer of ours.

Maria: On one of Tito's daily walks, we stop by one of the organizations on the task force. It's called the Grace Center, a drop-in shelter where people can come get lunch, play music and just catch a break. When we get here, the social worker in charge has to take a man outside. He's not responsive, and has some swelling on his foot.

Tito: Christine, you need help?

Maria: Tito and Christine Bobek, the social worker, they know this man. They know he has problems with substance use and some heart issues. Christine calls him a cab to the emergency room, so he wouldn't have to pay for an ambulance.

Christine: Once he got up we called the taxi, once he got up and he was moving around and talking, I felt it was okay to send him in a taxi and so we have an account, and they bill us once a month.

Maria: Tito and Christine work together regularly because they take care of some of the same people.

Christine: Everybody knows everybody. That can be good and bad, but in a community where there's a lot of social service agencies trying to meet the need, it helps that we go to meetings every month. We see each other.

Maria: This kind of collaboration -- between law enforcement, public health, social services -- is in stark contrast with the harsh policing people like Tito experienced back in the day.

Tito: I'm a victim of the first epidemic back in the late '60s, early '70s.

Maria: He was living in New York, where he's from. And he'd just come home from fighting in Vietnam.

Tito: But when I went into the military, I found heroin and I was off and running. And when I came back to New York and I came back to New York, I was 118 pounds and coming back from an unpopular war and that was it. I was addicted. I loved the high. I still love the high.

Maria: There wasn't a police assisted recovery program back then. There wasn't a restorative justice approach.

Tito: It was harder drug laws. It was mandatory sentencing. In New York it was stop and search. The cops were able, you know, they just needed, if you didn't look right, they stopped and searched you. And it was concentrated to primarily communities of color and poor white communities, you know, in the rural areas, you know, it was different than it was now and this is, I don't want to sound like poor me kind of stuff. But this epidemic, the landscape, the color of the landscape changed. And, you know, and then you got a response like the Angels Program.

Maria: This is the most prevalent criticism of the nationwide response to today's opioid crisis. Some advocates say that authorities and the white middle class have only started to care about addiction because it hit their communities.

Tito is Puerto Rican. He grew up back and forth between the Bronx and the island. And he's always been political, even back when he was using. So he sees the disparity.

Tito: But when I say the color of the landscape changed is that when Rodriguez, Garcia, Shanaynay, all that -- when they were dying of overdoses, no one was paying attention. No one was paying attention. But the color changed. And now you have kids from the suburbs grappling with the same problem and same issues. I really don't want to make it seem -- 'cause addiction is brutal. But those families had the wherewithal to develop more appropriate responses. We didn't have that.

Maria: And this isn't just about opioids.

Rahsaan: The sentencing disparities for the -- for crack cocaine, it was 100 to one versus powdered cocaine.

Maria: This is Rahsaan Hall from the Massachusetts ACLU. He says this tough on crime attitude that dominated the crack epidemic of the ‘80s and ‘90s -- it fell largely on the backs of people of color, and it didn’t work.

Rahsaan: And this was all a part of the legislative push to make stiffer and harsher penalties because there was this belief that we had to be tough on crime to have this deterrent effect, which in fact it did not have a deterrent effect.

Maria: Now, the “war on drugs” approach is shifting with regard to opioids. And the hope is, some of the racial disparities in policing will shift, too.

But they still exist in the way Massachusetts polices another drug: marijuana. Cannabis has been legal in Massachusetts since 2016, but there have been bureaucratic delays, so at the time of this recording, there’s still nowhere to buy it legally for recreational purposes. Which means, unless you have a medical card, or you’re growing it at home, if you’re smoking pot, you bought it illegally.

The Massachusetts ACLU reported that since decriminalization, black people get arrested for marijuana possession three times more often than whites. Even though the Mass Department of Health says mostly young white men use marijuana.

Rahsaan: If the police were to start investigations in Boston College, Boston University, Harvard, MIT, you would start to see an uptick in the number of arrests of white people, but they're not focusing their efforts on policing those environments because they believe that these are well-adjusted young people who are just doing what college kids do. But when it's in a community, a black or Latinx community, there is a different perspective on what that behavior is and it's seen as more problematic.

Maria: And Hall says, though he appreciates what police departments like Gloucester and Arlington have been doing, he believes part of their success is due to their homogeneity.

Rahsaan: They have communities that are largely white, and I think it is easier for people to embrace more kind of socialistic type or restorative programs in a community where they can identify with the people who live in their community and it's not the others who are reaping the benefits of progressive programming like this.

Musical interlude.

Maria: Massachusetts is famous for its progressive politics -- it was the first state to allow same-sex marriage. There’s free health care. It kind of makes sense for restorative policing to take hold here. But even still...

Rahsaan: The national disparity in incarceration is like five to one black to white. But in Massachusetts it's eight to one. And so for this liberal progressive bastion to have that type of racial disparity, it says something about the system.

Maria: PAARI, the Police Assisted Addiction Recovery Initiative, doesn't address racial disparities directly, but their goal is to keep opioid-related incarcerations down, in whatever community they have a presence. And at the very least, in Arlington and in Gloucester, that seems to be what's happening. Arlington Police Chief Fred Ryan says his officers get implicit bias training, which is important especially because who gets arrested and who gets referred to treatment is up to individual officers' discretion.

In Gloucester, Chief McCarthy and advocates like Tito Rodriguez say they're confident that everyone who comes to them for help gets it.

Tito: For people struggling with addiction, it's a game changer. It's true community policing for addiction. It's a good, true community policing. And I wish it were around when I was using. Uh, things might've been a little different. But, but life happens the way it's supposed to happen, so.

In Gloucester, I'm Maria Murriel for 70 Million.

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