

Local Municipalities to Utilize Attorney General's Opioid Settlement Funds

Cities and Towns to Enter Grant Agreement with GAAMHA to Use Funding to Combat Ongoing Opioid Crisis

GARDNER, MA – Representative Jon Zlotnik (D-Gardner), Representative Kim Ferguson (R-Holden), Representative Susannah Whipps (I-Athol), and Senator Anne Gobi (D-Spencer) announce the planned agreement between GAAMHA, Inc. and local municipalities to form a regional approach in an effort to further combat the opioid crisis in the area.

In July 2021, Attorney General Maura Healey announced the \$26 billion nationwide settlement, with the Commonwealth receiving more than \$500 million to be used for various prevention, recovery, and opioid-related services.

In an effort spearheaded by Representative Zlotnik and members of the state delegation, the City of Gardner, and the Towns of Ashburnham, Templeton, Winchendon, and Westminster have initiated the agreement between themselves and GAAMHA, Inc. to utilize this funding for opioid-related services.

In recent years there has been a trend across the Commonwealth, and across the US, of Police Departments and Municipalities integrating mental health and substance use clinicians into their departments in an attempt to find newer and healthier ways to respond to citizens and families in need. While this trend is a move in the right direction, it is a move that has only been available to larger communities with enough budget flexibility to absorb the significant expense of employing qualified clinical professionals. To date, these crucial services have been outside the reach of smaller, more rural communities in spite of their sharing the same struggles as their larger counterparts. This new regional collaboration is a prime example of small communities doing what they do best, finding innovative and resourceful solutions to bond together and solve problems. This partnership between Gardner, Winchendon, Westminster, Ashburnham, and Templeton will give each community access to a GAAMHA Recovery Support Navigator (RSN) who can assist first responders, municipal departments, residents, and families who are in crisis related to substance use. An RSN is a clinician trained specifically in assessing an individual's substance use, and the impact it has on all facets of their life. The RSN then takes this assessment and assists the individual to navigate the complex system of care that surrounds substance use treatment and recovery supports and access the appropriate type of care for that individual. In addition to treatment and recovery support, RSN's are adept at identifying and accessing supports around the peripheral issues that often coincide with substance use disorders such as insurance coverage, housing, family support, and employment services. By having an RSN to work as an extension of these town departments, we will provide a badly needed service for our local citizens and we allow our other trained professionals, such as first responders, to focus on doing what they do best rather than trying to be social workers and clinicians. This will be a cost effective and impactful way to utilize the relatively small opioid settlement funds each partner community will receive.

"I'm incredibly excited for GAAMHA to further our existing partnerships with our local communities with whom we've worked so closely in trying to find new ways to respond to the substance use epidemic

in our region” said **Shawn Hayden, Vice President of GAAMHA, Inc.** “As a community-based non-profit, GAAMHA prides itself on maximizing all of our resources so that we can provide more services on a smaller budget, and bring these services to our most vulnerable citizens. This regional collaboration is an example of that discipline on a larger scale, and allows our small local cities and towns to provide "big city" services to their residents."

“I am really excited to see what this new regional collaborative will be able to accomplish,” said **Mike Nicholson, Mayor of the City of Gardner.** “The opioid epidemic has touched the lives of everyone in our region either directly or through our loved ones. We have made large strides in boosting our prevention and recovery efforts in the region and this work allows those successes to grow. I’d like to thank Representative Zlotnik, our local legislative delegation, and my colleagues in local government for devising a plan for these funds that will have the greatest and most effective impact.”

“Ensuring that our opioid recoveries directly address the epidemic has been my office’s top priority,” said **Attorney General Maura Healey.** “Cities and towns across Massachusetts have a shared commitment in making sure that every dollar goes toward treatment and recovery services, and this agreement with GAAMHA is a shining example. Using this funding to combat the crisis is what we promised to the families who’ve been hurt, and we are delivering on that promise.”

This agreement between local municipalities and GAAMHA, Inc. will ensure that this funding is used to combat the opioid crisis and provide prevention-related services through a regional partnership. Funding from the Attorney General’s opioid settlement is scheduled to continue to be paid to participating municipalities throughout the Commonwealth until 2031.