

# NWI leaders optimistic about drug task force's recommendations



Wayne Isailovich speaks at Northwest Indiana drug task force meeting in file photo. (Jim Karczewski / Post-Tribune)

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**S**ubstance use disorder is a "layered, complex onion," said Jena Bellezza, and she's excited that an Indiana governor's task force tackled the topic that way.

The Governor's Task Force on Drug Enforcement, Treatment and Prevention went around the state since September of last year, including to IUN, asking for local residents' and experts' input on how to tackle the state's drug problem.

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It's not an easily-fixed issue, said Bellezza, of the Indiana Parenting Institute, and Hoosiers join other communities and states across the country in tackling the drug and opioid crisis the nation faces.

"The truth is, none of us have all the answers," said Wayne Isailovich, the executive director of Merrillville's Addiction and Behavioral Counseling Services

Inc. who spoke to the task force at IUN.

Earlier this month, the task force released their final report (found at [bit.ly/2hQz8mR](https://bit.ly/2hQz8mR)), outlining their recommendations on how Indiana should move forward to start addressing the topic. Those from Northwest Indiana who spoke to the task force, such as Bellezza and Isailovich, said they are excited and hopeful for what's proposed.

### **Finding the gaps**

Traveling around the state allowed task force members, such as Mary Beth Bonaventura, who is the director of Indiana Department of Child Services and former Lake County juvenile court senior judge, to see where gaps are, she said.

"Even though Lake County is close to Chicago with all of its resources, there are still gaps in resources that leaders should step up to," Bonaventura said.

Isailovich emphasized the need for affordable, long-term treatment to the task force.

"Until we start making treatment available to those that can't afford it that are willing to go through with it, then we're spinning our wheels," Isailovich said. "And I don't like to see wheels spin. That means I'm stuck."

The task force looked at how to do that, implementing the Gold Card Program to help get people medications they need, as well as waivers to help more people be covered.

Part of the issue is balancing treatment while also enforcing the law and protecting the community, said Lake County Prosecutor Bernard Carter, who also served on the task force. While the final report supports penalties on serious aggravated offenders, it also recommends therapeutic communities to help inmates get treatment. In Northwest Indiana, Carter and Porter County Sheriff David Reynolds feel drug courts, jails and judges in Lake and Porter counties have worked toward a similar goal to get people help while going through the justice system.

### **Emphasis on prevention**

The final report also focused on prevention, addressing prescribing practices, in addition to providing naloxone to emergency personnel and other individuals in rural and urban communities. The report highlight Porter County Sheriff's Department, which established a Heroin Overdose Response Team to investigate overdoses.

Reynolds puts a heavy emphasis on prevention, which is why he takes a drug prevention video of offenders around to local schools to educate students about decisions they make, and the task force recommended programs specifically addressing you.

Bellezza is excited the task force heard her about the need to support the families of people facing addictions to help with recovery and prevent it from beginning a generational problem, she said.

"Addiction is a family's disease," Bellezza said. "It affects not just the health of the family but the community."

The task force started implementing their recommendations before the final report, but change won't happen overnight, as there are procedural and cultural changes that have to happen, said John Hill, co-chair of the task force and the governor's deputy chief of staff for public safety.

"I think we have to get passed this idea about stigmatizing individuals," Hill said.

But Bellezza is energized that if the recommendations are followed, these shifts can happen, and the task force helped establish the Indiana Commission to Combat Drug Abuse to build off what they have done into 2017.

"With the establishment of this permanent commission, Hoosiers can be assured the fight against addictions becomes more than just an area of temporary focus and contemplation," said John Wernert, Hill's co-chair and Secretary of Indiana's Family & Social Services Administration, in an email. "It is and will be an ongoing effort within our state, now and as we march forward into the future."

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