

Economic Impact of Drug and Alcohol Abuse

“Prescription drug abuse is claiming too many lives, threatening public safety, and placing unnecessary obstacles in the way of economic prosperity in Appalachia.” US National Drug Control Policy Director Gil Kerlikowske

Drug and alcohol abuse is widespread in Tennessee and Virginia. But, when it comes to addiction, who suffers? The person battling addiction faces many hardships, as do their families, friends, co-workers, employers and the healthcare industry.

Stepping back from the private stories of broken homes, legal charges, financial hardship and physical and mental health problems that accompany addiction, it is evident how drug and alcohol abuse impacts the entire community in a negative way.

The 2006 data (the most recent information available) estimates that excessive alcohol consumption was then responsible for an average of 80,000 deaths in the U.S. each year and cost \$223.5 billion; Tennessee’s cost was an estimated \$4.1 billion and Virginia’s was \$5.3 billion. These numbers have likely risen drastically since they were reported in 2006.

Estimated costs of non-medical use of prescription opioids was \$55.7 billion in 2007 (the last reported data) including \$25 billion in direct healthcare costs, \$45.1 billion in criminal justice costs and billions more in lost productivity costs not included in this number. Oxycodone, hydrocodone, propoxyphene, and methadone accounted for two-thirds of the \$55.7 billion costs. Studies have found that opioid abusers generate, on average, annual direct health care costs 8.7 times higher than non-abusers.

As of December 31, 2014, the Tennessee Dept. of Corrections had an annual budget of \$933 million and the Department of Corrections in Virginia had a budget of \$1.1 billion. The cost of incarceration is high and not just in dollars. The available information shows that the majority of inmates in our region are locked up on drug charges, or charges related to drugs. This is especially true concerning female inmates. The effects of incarceration are felt across society.

In America, a baby is born dependent on opioids every 19 minutes. Babies are born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) due to the mother’s ingestion of drugs during pregnancy. Tennessee had 850 NAS babies born last year. Sullivan County had the highest number of NAS babies born in Tennessee. Virginia had more than 500 addicted babies born last year and is seeing an alarming rise in the numbers in that state. The approximate, average hospital cost for a NAS baby is \$75,000, which does not include the future long-term effects and treatment. The total cost for Tennessee and Virginia NAS babies last year approximates \$101 million.