

How Staten Island's Drug Problem Made It a Target for Poaching Patients

By: Megan Julia

At drug treatment centers on Staten Island, the calls disturb the daily routine. The solicitations interrupt meals, counseling sessions and support groups.

Sometimes, staff members say, the callers make explicit offers: thousands of dollars to refer a person with a heroin or pain-pill addiction and good insurance. Other offers are more subtle — a recurring donation or a contract.

The callers are recruiters working for treatment centers as far away as Arizona, California or Florida, or as close as Long Island or upstate New York, all angling to fill their beds with patients from Staten Island.

"They are opportunistic people or organizations who are preying on people of vulnerability at a time of high stress," said Luke Nasta, director of the addiction treatment center Camelot of Staten Island, which has been there for 45 years. "It's unethical. It's borderline criminal."

The calls began years ago, Mr. Nasta said, but they have become far more frequent as Staten Island's opioid addiction rate has soared and brought the borough some notoriety. An episode of the National Geographic series "Drugs, Inc." last year described it as "Heroin Island."

"If you're in the business you say, 'Oh, well this is a fertile ground,'" Mr. Nasta said. "So they come here and they solicit."

Even if the solicitations do not cross a legal line, people in the treatment community say they do cross an ethical line.

"There are enough people doing it who seem to think it's O.K., or know that it's not and don't care," said Marvin Ventrell, the executive director of the National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers, which has about 550 members.

Some people end up in drug treatment by court order; others at the urging of family or friends. In New York, some treatment programs are for-profit. Most, like Camelot's 45-bed residential center for men, are nonprofit.

"If a person comes to this door, the last thing I want to talk to him about is what kind of insurance he's got," John Coleman, the director of operations at Camelot, said. "I'm not saying that's not important or doesn't play a part in getting help, but I don't care. I want them in the doors and off the street."

In 2015, Staten Island recorded the highest rate of overdose deaths involving prescription

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Coalition Against Insurance Fraud

painkillers in New York City and had the second highest rate of overdose deaths involving heroin, after the Bronx, according to the city's Department of Mental Health and Hygiene.

'A Quick Buck'

Dennis Jay, executive director of the Coalition Against Insurance Fraud, a nonprofit based in Washington, said the money surging into drug treatment had made patient brokering hard to stop.

"In four years, not just the treatment centers, a whole industry has been created," Mr. Jay said. "It's a little bit scary to just see how much money is available in this. You just wonder how many are in it to make a quick buck."

A federal law prohibits paying for referrals for treatment covered by Medicaid. But patient referrals for care covered by private insurance or paid for out of pocket would most likely be regulated by the individual state, Mr. Jay said. Some, like Texas, have regulations prohibiting paid referrals in the mental health and addiction treatment field. New York regulators can penalize addiction treatment organizations if they are found to be "soliciting or receiving, or agreeing to receive, any fee" to or from a third party for the referral of a patient."