

Beautification effort targets hard-hit Bangor neighborhood

Recovery center, United Way clean up area with high overdose rate

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A new initiative involving a Bangor addiction recovery organization aims to beautify a section of the city with a concentration of low-income residents that has also seen a large portion of the city's overdose deaths.

Volunteers and leaders from the Together Place Peer Run Recovery Center have started beautifying a section of the city close to downtown by planting flowers, a vegetable garden and cleaning up a park. Their work aims to spruce up the area of the city just outside of downtown that includes Union Street and First, Second and Third streets.

The Together Place is a peer-run recovery center that offers help to people with substance use disorder and mental health challenges. Its leaders note that many suffer from both.

The group worked with United Way of Eastern Maine to clean up Bangor's Second Street Park last Monday, which included the removal of more than 200 hypodermic needles. Teams of volunteers were also sent into surrounding streets (including Union, Main, Walter and Third), where they cleaned up litter and another 100 needles.

Some of the 75 volunteers included employees at the nearby Shaw's Supermarket, said Sean Faircloth, executive director of Maine Mental Health Connections, Together Place's parent organization.

A map of 2017 opioid overdoses released by the city of Bangor shows a high number of opioid overdoses and deaths clustered around that area. The park also has a tumultuous reputation, with many remembering assaults there that were widely shared on social media in 2019.

On the same day as the park cleanup, Together Place's leaders and volunteers also planted flower gardens in front of the recovery center's building on Union Street and a vegetable garden near Shaw's. The Together Place will continue to tend to those gardens and plants, and the group plans other beautification efforts, said Doug Dunbar, 54, of Hermon, who has volunteered with the Together Place for three years.



Volunteers and leaders from the Together Place Peer Run Recovery Center and the United Way of Eastern Maine worked together to beautify a section of the city close to downtown by planting flowers, a vegetable garden and cleaning up the Second Street Park. These flowers were planted along Union Street at Second Street. Credit: Linda Coan O'Kresik / BDN

The experience of many Together Place clients parallel his own. Dunbar has had lifelong struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety. Those took a turn for the worse when he was working as a press secretary for then-Rep. John Baldacci during the 9/11 attacks. Working in Washington, D.C., he saw smoke billowing from the Pentagon, where one of the planes had hit.

"There couldn't have been a worse traumatic event for someone with OCD to be right in the middle of than Sept. 11," Dunbar said. "Everything seemed out of control. No one knew what was going to happen next." Dunbar began drinking heavily almost immediately after, though he long hid his substance use disorder from his friends and family, even as he was arrested several times. A final drunken driving arrest landed him in Penobscot County Jail, after which he began to seek help.

Dunbar helps those at Together Place with financial management and getting into the workforce. His work with the organization greatly assisted in his own recovery, he said.

Together Place, which began in 1981, is known to many in Bangor for the large murals on its building at the corner of Union and Second streets that depict Maine icons including Stephen King, Dorothea Dix and Joshua Chamberlain. The organization will work with a professional artist to add new murals to the building later in the summer, Faircloth said.

The center's work focuses on small meetings, including one-on-one sessions with peer support specialists — people who have usually been through challenges similar to those of the people they're helping. It also offers a variety of other services, including creative writing groups.

Dunbar said he hopes that some of the work Together Place has done in the neighborhood surrounding it will bring investment and support to that area.

"Just because someone lives in poverty doesn't mean that they are confined to that condition," Dunbar said, "and it doesn't mean people aren't there to help."