

Pushing the boulder

By Rob Kent

People often ask me why our response to the COVID crisis has been different than the response to the overdose epidemic.

I believe it is rooted in the following thinking.

COVID is something that happens to you through no fault of your own. Addiction is something you bring on yourself! When it is not your fault, it is our problem. When it is your fault, it is your problem. When it is your fault, we tend to ignore science and evidence even more than we now do when it is not your fault.

We will not overcome this thinking by wasting time trying to win the hearts and minds of policymakers. Our best chance is to use the laws and litigate and to find supportive policymakers and help them push policy change. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects some folks who use drugs and alcohol. The Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act (EMTALA) likely protects folks who come up in emergency rooms until they are stable. However, a belief in what the laws protect are theory until someone sues thereby allowing the courts review the laws and provide us with answers. The courts have been used successfully to require jails and prisons to provide SUD treatment. We are also likely to find new supportive policymakers as we move forward because the loss of life to drugs and alcohol will likely affect them eventually.

This is like a silent and unacknowledged holocaust! Too many seem to have decided that folks who cannot control their use of drugs and alcohol are inferior and should be written off. They are lesser than us! The only difference is that we are letting them kill themselves and offer little help to those who want to change!

During the Nazi holocaust Pastor Martin Niemoller wrote about the dangers of indifference when he said:

*First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.*

The worrisome part is that I do not know that this thinking will ever change enough for us to do what needs to do, what we know will work. We may be reaching a point where tens of thousands of Americans dying from drugs and alcohol is an acceptable loss.

Please understand that I will never give up! Maybe this is a message to myself, and to you, that sometimes the boulder we are pushing up the hill is winning! Maybe this is a message to us that we need to find more folks willing to push the boulder. Maybe it is a message to the lawyers who work in this space that challenging policies in the courts is necessary to provide the leverage to move the boulder.

I would rather be crushed by the weight of the boulder than to give up! What about yours? •

Rob Kent, JD is president of Kent Strategic Advisors. Reach him at (518) 669-8596, www.KentStrategicAdvisors.com