## Lifting the silence around veteran addiction

s Memorial Day approaches, Americans nationwide prepare to honor the brave men and women who gave their lives in service to our country. Ceremonies will be held, flags will be flown at half-staff and families will gather to pay tribute. But amid the solemnity and gratitude lies a quieter, often overlooked truth. Many of our heroes return home not to peace but to a new battlefield, one waged within.

It's a battle that doesn't make headlines and is waged silently behind closed doors, far from the front lines. Military service members and veterans face unique and profound challenges that can linger long after their tours of duty end. While we rightfully celebrate their courage and sacrifice, we too often fail to recognize the invisible wounds many carry, particularly those that lead to substance use disorders.

The harsh reality is that exposure to combat, traumatic inju-

ries and the pressure to reintegrate into civilian life all contribute to an increased risk of developing a substance use disorder, experiencing drug overdose or suicidal ideation.

The connection between military service and addiction is not often discussed, but it should be. According

to census data, in 2022, 154,678 veterans lived in Kansas. While it is challenging to know how many veterans in local communities struggle with addiction and mental health issues, there are some national and state trends among veterans and the general population that offer some insight into the problems.

Veteran suicide data in Kansas, for example, shows that after accounting for age differences, the veteran suicide rate in the state was signifi-

> cantly higher than the national general population, according to Veterans Affairs. In 2022, there were 81 veteran suicide deaths in the state.

Nationally, the 2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health reports that 6.3% of veterans had a substance use dis-

order in the past year. Alcohol use, for example, was common among 56% of veterans, while 22% engaged in binge drinking and 5.2% experienced an alcohol use disorder.

Alcohol abuse, in general, unfortunately, is a common precursor for addiction and suicidal ideation and increases the risk of drug abuse and drug overdose. Drug poisoning deaths, for example, have been on a

steady increase in Kansas since 2016. In 2022, there were 738 drug poisoning deaths, an 8.8% increase from the previous year, according to the Kansas Division of Public Health.

We need to normalize conversations around mental health and addiction within military culture. We should also support community-based organizations and nonprofits doing critical work in this space. Many of these groups offer holistic, veteran-centered services that go beyond what traditional institutions can provide, from non-traditional therapy and outdoor rehabilitation programs to job training and sober housing.

We must also expand access to comprehensive, trauma-informed care, particularly in rural areas where resources are scarce. Fortunately, there are some resources to help, such as the Veterans Crisis Line:

dial 988, then press 1, or text 838255 anywhere in the state. The Kansas Substance Use Disorder Hotline is also available by calling 1-866-645-8216. Mental health, substance abuse, and peer support for veterans and families are available on the Kansas Department of Aging & Disability Services website.

The connection between military service and substance use disorders is not a comfortable topic. But it is a necessary one. To truly honor the men and women who defend our freedoms, we must be willing to confront the unseen battles they face and commit ourselves to being part of their recovery. This Memorial Day, let's do more than remember the dead. Let's fight for the living.

Jody Boulay works as a community outreach coordinator for DRS to help spread awareness of the dangers of drugs and alcohol.

# NEK-CAP, Inc. celebrates 60 years of service

**Staff report** 

The Community Action Network helps empower families to achieve economic independence rather than keeping them reliant on government

There are nearly 1,000 agencies across the country working every day to create economic opportunity, strengthen local communities and help families

find pathways to prosperity.

This year, NEK-CAP, Inc., a member of the Community Action Network, commemorates 60 years of helping families throughout a 16-county service area in northeast/north central Kansas (Atchison, Brown, Doniphan, Jackson, Jefferson, Jewell, Leavenworth, Marshall, Mitchell, Nemaha, Osborne, Pottawatomie, Republic, Riley, Shawnee, Smith, and

Washington counties).

"Each May, during Community Action Month, we reflect on the impact NEK-CAP, Inc. and our network has had on families," said Jeanette Collier, executive director of NEK-CAP, Inc. "Last year alone, we served over 2,200 individuals (or over 750 households) in our 16-county service area and over 15 million were assisted across the county by the

Community Action Network."

**Community Action Agencies** ensure that American families have access to the opportunities they need to thrive, while also promoting local economic growth and reducing government dependency. All agencies are locally controlled with boards of directors composed of local elected officials, private and public sector representatives and community residents.

"We are proud of our communities' participation in the development and oversight of our programs," said Collier. "Their engagement helps us to be more effective in our approach by determining what northeast/north central

Kansas needs." For more information about the programs, services, career opportunities and more, visit www.nekcap.org

#### **Foundation**

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"Lansing was a great place to grow up in for all of us," he said.

Young said he struggled in school, but he had an interest

"All you need to be is good at one thing, and I built upon that," he said.

Friday's event included a state of the district address by Superintendent Marty Kobza as well as the presentation of various awards.

Numerous students were recognized for academic achievement.

Cheryl Sander was recognized as the school district's Elementary Teacher of the Year, and Brandy Hamilton was recognized as the Secondary Teacher of the Year.

Hallie Hughes and Victoria Fevurly were recognized as the **Educational Support Staff of** the Year.

Retiring employees Karen Averill, Ron Averill, Patti Boe-Cackler, Sara Mulford and Sandy VanCise were honored during the breakfast.

The foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to Chris Aus.

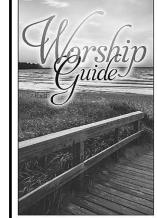
Aus is the former president of the foundation and one of the organization's founding members.

'The schools are the heart of the city of Lansing," she said.



Chris Aus speaks after being presented the Lansing Educational Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award on Friday during LEF's annual Honors Breakfast. John Richmeier





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Marty Kobza provides a state of the district address Friday during the Lansing Educational Foundation's annual Honors Breakfast. John Richmeier

Superintendent

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