UW Health: University Hospital's ED partners with local organizations to fight the opioid epidemic

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MADISON- As a way to fight the opioid epidemic in the region, UW Health and Safe Communities are launching a program of recovery coaches for people who end up in the emergency department because of an opioid overdose.

"A pilot project showed that 90 percent of patients who were paired with a recovery coach entered into treatment," said Cheryl Wittke, executive director at Safe Communities. "Recovery coaches are people who have survived overdoses and are now in long-term recovery."

When a patient arrives at the emergency department at University Hospital for drug overdose, after medical stabilization, an on-call recovery coach may be notified. If the patient is agreeable, the recovery coach can provide early intervention and stay in close contact with the patient and family and through the treatment process.

Safe Communities, a Dane County-based nonprofit injury prevention coalition, will fund and oversee the paid recovery coaches. The coaches are on call from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. seven days a week.

The ultimate goals of the program are to increase treatment and recovery support services, reduce ED recidivism and decrease the number of overdose deaths.

The program is funded through a partnership with Safe Communities, Dane County, Wisconsin Voices for Recovery at the UW Division of Continuing Studies, a private family foundation, UW Health and Unity Point Health – Meriter.

"The Recovery Coach Program could be integral in mitigating the deadly trend of opioid abuse, by making that connection with the patient during the crisis period, and provide that bridge to the needed resources that can assist with the recovery process," said Anne Rifleman, UW Health director of emergency services.