

Leaders, treatment providers reflect on success stories from 2 years of Operation Rio Grande

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SALT LAKE CITY — Amy Daeschel had gone to college. She had a career. A family.

“I did everything that was acceptable to society,” she recalled. But after a series of surgeries over a year and a half, at age 38 she says she developed a dependency on pain medications.

“And then life had a beautiful way of bringing trauma into my world,” Daeschel said.

Her ex-husband took their children, whom she had full custody of, and left the state. Her mom committed suicide.

“With the dependency, this is where it turned into an addiction. I started to treat emotional pain on top of the physical pain. I broke. And I was cut off of the pain medication with no taper, and if anybody understands opiate addiction, you understand the physical pain you go through on withdrawal,” she explained.

Daeschel said she was lured in by the accessibility of heroin “and I fell, and I broke. It took everything in two months. That’s how fast this disease took me.”

She ended up living on the streets of Salt Lake City, where she says she was deep in hopelessness and despair with no obvious escape.

Daeschel — no longer homeless — spoke Tuesday near the streets where she once slept on the ground. There, she met with Rep. Ben McAdams, D-Utah, Salt Lake County Mayor Jenny Wilson and drug treatment providers to talk about the impact of Operation Rio Grande, launched just over two years ago to chip away at crime and lawlessness in the neighborhood around the downtown homeless shelter.

Because she didn’t have the extensive criminal history that others had, Daeschel said she once sat on waiting lists for two years to get into treatment programs. She was arrested seven times and released each time.

But then Operation Rio Grande began on Aug. 14, 2017.

Since the operation’s launch, Utah officials reported 150 people have entered Salt Lake County’s drug court program; 417 new beds in treatment centers have been gained; and 533 people have been placed into treatment. Nearly 250 have since found work.

Access to the targeted adult Medicaid program has enabled 2,545 people in the county to enroll.

Daeschel said thanks to the help she got after she was arrested during the operation, she has been sober since Aug. 23, 2017, and now works as a counselor at a treatment facility.

“We’ve shown that access to drug treatment is key to our efforts as a community and as a country to combat the opioid epidemic that has devastated individuals, devastated families and neighborhoods,” said McAdams, who served as county mayor when the program began.

The program has faced some criticism since its inception.

Last year, the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah spoke out against the operation, saying the thousands of arrests have not led to thousands receiving treatment, and has even left many worse off, with new marks on their criminal records.

“We have had a lot of conversations since that time about, ‘Was it a success?’” Wilson noted. But the operation has led to improvements in the neighborhood and increased access to care.

“If it were not for the actions taken two years ago, we could not have sorted that out,” she said. Wilson called the operation “an action in the right direction” that helped pull the city out of “its darkest days.”

Proof of the operation’s success can be seen in the success of Daeschel and others who have overcome their addictions with the treatment, according to the mayor.

Shawn McMillen, executive director of First Step House, said, “We have been able to touch a population that we had not previously been able to touch. They were individuals with a significantly more serious constellations of physical health problems. Some individuals with more complicated diabetes, diabetes that had gone untreated.”

He said because of the strong economy, many of those who complete treatment have been able to find jobs that pay a living wage.

“People who were feeling helpless are feeling hopeful,” McMillen said.