

# DAILY NEWS

Since 1854 — News from Montcalm County and Ionia County, Michigan

## Eye on opioids

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### Newly formed committee prioritizing how Montcalm County opioid funding should be spent

By Elisabeth Waldon on June 06, 2023

0:00 / 0:00



Montcalm County's newly formed opioid committee recently held its first two meetings at the Montcalm County Administrative Building in Stanton. The committee is comprised of Kate Behrenwald, an addiction medicine physician's assistant for Corewell Health; Liz Braddock, the health officer for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department; Jim Dimitriou, the compliance officer for Sheridan Community Hospital; Montcalm County Undersheriff Andy Doezema; Aimee Johnson, a nurse practitioner for Sparrow Health; Juliana Kozara, clinical director of the Montcalm Care Network; John Kroneck, health promotion supervisor for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department; Kristen Lindsey, the mental health and homeless coordinator for the Montcalm Area Intermediate School District; Montcalm County Controller-Administrator Brenda Taeter; and Administrative Aide Michelle Becker (who takes meeting minutes). — DN Photo | Elisabeth Waldon

STANTON — The nine members of a newly formed committee to help determine how opioid lawsuit settlement dollars should be spent in Montcalm County all have their own reasons for being there.

Kate Behrenwald, an addiction medicine physician's assistant for Corewell Health and president of The Red Project Board in Kent County is also a member of the Lakeview Village Council.

“That’s where this stuff starts — education for teachers and students is important to help get control of this stuff before it’s too late,” she said.

Montcalm County Undersheriff Andy Doezema and his colleagues have daily contact with those in jail because of opioid-related reasons, while Liz Braddock, the health officer for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department Health, is there to assist Montcalm County Controller-Administrator Brenda Taeter with guiding the committee.

Aimee Johnson, a nurse practitioner for Sparrow Health in Stanton, is on the committee for a much more personal reason: Her brother died from a fentanyl overdose this past February.

“We had no clue he was using,” Johnson said.

“I don’t think a lot of people know how many fatal overdoses there have been in Montcalm County since Jan. 1,” she added. “I didn’t know until my brother died. Since then, I’ve connected with about 15 families who have lost loved ones to fentanyl overdoses.”

### OPIOID ABUSE A LOCAL ISSUE

The Montcalm County Board of Commissioners in early 2018 voted to adopt a resolution approving three law firms representing dozens of Michigan counties in a multi-district lawsuit settlement against opioid manufacturers. Montcalm County commissioners in December 2021 approved a resolution outlining terms of the lawsuit settlement.



Liz Braddock, left, the health officer for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department, shares her thoughts regarding treating opioid addiction in Montcalm County. Listening is Jim Dimitriou, right, the compliance officer for Sheridan Community Hospital. — DN Photo | Elisabeth Waldon

Montcalm County is expected to receive about \$2.2 million from the settlement (the county has received \$416,124 so far and the payments could take up to 18 years to be handed out by the opioid manufacturers).

Montcalm County commissioners this past April approved creating a committee to determine the best ways to spend its opioid lawsuit settlement dollars according to the eight allowable areas of spending, which are data, criminal/legal, equity, harm reduction, pregnant/parenting, prevention, recovery and treatment. Any of the committee’s recommendations will be made to county commissioners, who will have the final say.

According to a study by the Ten16 Recovery Network, sponsored by the Michigan Health Endowment Fund, Montcalm County in fiscal year 2021 had the highest number of admissions into treatment facilities for alcohol abuse (142 people), methamphetamine (141 people) and prescription opiates (47 people) and the second most for heroin (91 people) of a 10-county area. Neighboring Mecosta and Newaygo counties also placed high in that study (Ionia County was not included in this particular study).

As previously covered by the Daily News in 2021, HIV cases are increasing in West Michigan, including in Montcalm County, which the Michigan Department of Health & Human Services has identified as being at risk for an HIV outbreak, due in part to injection drug use, which not only

Montcalm County has one of Michigan's highest levels of chronic hepatitis C rates (nearly 50 to nearly 68 people per every 100,000 people, as of 2019) due to the sharing of injection drugs, according to the MMDHD.

In late 2021, the MMDHD Board of Health voted to implement a syringe service program in Montcalm County, which is currently located at Randy's House in Greenville and is operated in conjunction with The Red Project in Grand Rapids.

### LACK OF SERVICES, TRANSPORTATION

Montcalm County's new opioid committee held its first meeting on May 18 at the Montcalm County Administrative Building in Stanton. Along with Behrenwald, Braddock, Doezema, Johnson, Lindsey and Taeter (plus Administrative Aide Michelle Becker, who takes meeting minutes), the committee is rounded out by Jim Dimitriou, the compliance officer for Sheridan Community Hospital; Juliana Kozara, clinical director of the Montcalm Care Network; and John Kroneck, health promotion supervisor for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department.



At left, John Kroneck, health promotion supervisor for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department, shares his thoughts regarding treating opioid addiction in Montcalm County while Montcalm County Undersheriff Andy Doezema listens. — DN Photo | Elisabeth Waldon

According to a 2021 community health needs assessment by Spectrum Health (now Corewell Health), a lack of local recovery and treatment sites are compounded by poverty issues and lack of transportation for addicts looking for help.

Behrenwald, who works in addiction medicine for Corewell, emphasized that lack of transportation is “a huge barrier in rural communities.

“I think transportation is ultimately one of the biggest things,” she said. “As far as medications for opioid use disorder, we have a big gap. There is no methadone provider. We do have residents in Montcalm County who are either driving to Mount Pleasant or Grand Rapids — every day, some of them, depending on how stable they are.”

Kroneck noted that specifically Carson City, Edmore, Howard City and Stanton are all underserved when it comes to addiction treatment.

“We need to expand the services into the rural,” he said. “It’s hard to set up a full-fledged clinic in a small, rural area.”

Committee members discussed the challenges of health organizations attempting to install Naloxone/Narcan vending machines in local communities.

Cherry Health, in partnership with The Red Project in Grand Rapids, recently installed one such vending machine at its Montcalm Health Center, 1003 N. Lafayette St. in Greenville, providing 24/7 access to free opioid overdose reversal kits.

“Cherry Health cannot keep their vending machine stocked,” Kroneck said. “They’re struggling to keep it stocked.”



Montcalm County Controller-Administrator Brenda Taeter, right, shares her thoughts regarding treating opioid addiction in Montcalm County as Administrative Aide Michelle Becker takes meeting minutes at the first gathering of a newly formed opioid committee. — DN Photo | Elisabeth Waldon

“We need more access to that, yeah,” Behrenwald said. “We do not have enough access for HIV, Hep C testing or fentanyl test strips.”

But other communities haven’t been welcoming. Kroneck noted that the Montcalm Care Network has been attempting to place similar vending machines in Carson City, Edmore and Howard City, but no one in those communities has been open to it so far (the Howard City Village Council in January voted to deny the installation of a Narcan vending machine in the Village Hall’s lobby).

Committee members noted that both fentanyl and Xylazine are a problem in Montcalm County as well — fentanyl is a synthetic opioid drug used for pain relief and is 50 times more potent than heroin, while Xylazine is a drug used on animals for sedation, anesthesia, muscle relaxation and pain relief.

“The fentanyl is coming on strong,” Kroneck said.

“Xylazine is here as well,” Behrenwald added. “Narcan is not effective with Xylazine as it’s not an opioid, but it’s used basically as a cut to give heroin legs, to extend that feeling. Basically, all of the heroin is fentanyl and fentanyl analogs.”

#### WHAT’S NEXT?

The opioid committee met again on June 1, and narrowed down their priorities of focus to access to local services, education and treatment/recovery needs. Braddock and her staff at the health department are putting together a presentation to be shown to the Montcalm County Board of Commissioners at their June 26 meeting.

The opioid committee is next scheduled to meet on June 13.

#### A CLOSER LOOK

As a newly formed committee begins looking into how opioid lawsuit settlement dollars should be spent in Montcalm County, here’s a look at current addiction resources/educational initiatives within the county:

- [Cherry Health’s Montcalm Health Center in Greenville](#), offers a variety of substance use treatments and a 24/7Naloxone/Narcan vending machine
- [Community Hope Christian Counseling in Greenville](#), offers addiction counseling
- [Corewell Health Center For Integrative Medicine](#) (formerly Spectrum Health), provides medical care for substance use disorders
- [Have Mercy in Greenville](#), a homeless shelter
- Mid-Michigan District Health Department [Addiction Recovery Meetings and Support Groups in Montcalm County](#)
- Mid-Michigan District Health Department Project Success: A research-based program designed to prevent and reduce substance use and abuse among adolescents attending middle school and high school. The program uses interventions that are effective in reducing risk factors and enhancing



the risk factors and local conditions that affect health and substance use in their own schools and communities, which allows them to tackle issues important to them. This group is made up of eighth through 12th grade students from several Montcalm County schools.

- [Montcalm Alano Center in Greenville](#), offers social opportunities, AA meetings and more
- [Montcalm Care Network in Stanton](#), treats co-occurring disorders and distributes Narcan/Naloxone
- [Montcalm Prevention Collaborative](#), formed in 2009 with the goal to reduce youth substance misuse throughout Montcalm County in a comprehensive and long-term manner
- [North Kent Guidance & Testing Services in Greenville](#), treats substance use disorders
- [Randy's House in Greenville](#), a recovery residence, offers a syringe service program in conjunction with [The Red Project in Grand Rapids](#)
- Residential Substance Abuse Treatment (RSTAT), available to inmates in the Montcalm County Jail.
- [Samaritan Health Care in Greenville](#), addiction and recovery care
- [Wedgwood Christian Services in Greenville](#), treats substance use disorders

Source: As discussed by Montcalm County's newly formed opioid committee

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# ***Income guidelines for WIC program increased; additional Michigan families may qualify***

Michigan's income guidelines for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) have increased and additional families may now qualify for the program.

"The 2023 federal income guidelines reflect a significant increase as of June 1," said Christina Herring, WIC director. "This is good news for Michiganders as more families may now be eligible for this important program that provides valuable nutritional education and healthy foods."

Family of four may qualify for WIC with an annual income of up to \$55,500, a \$4,162 or 8.1% increase from last year. WIC is open to participants with incomes up to 185% of the federal poverty level.

Updated income guidelines by family size are as follows:

<b>Family Size*</b>	<b>Annual Income</b>	<b>Weekly Income</b>
2	\$36,482	\$702
3	\$45,991	\$885
4	\$55,500	\$1,068
5	\$65,009	\$1,251
6	\$74,518	\$1,434

*\*Each expected infant counts as one in the family size.*

*\*For additional family sizes, please visit the Michigan WIC Income Guidelines.*

Individuals who are pregnant or have had a baby within the past six month; are currently breastfeeding; or are the parent or guardian of a child up to age 5, are encouraged to contact their local county health department or WIC agency to apply.

Families who receive Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families already meet the income qualifications for WIC. Families who do not qualify for these programs may still be eligible for WIC due to WIC's higher income limits.

WIC is a federally funded United States Department of Agriculture program administered by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. It serves low and moderate income pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women, infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk. WIC provides nutrition education, supplemental foods, breastfeeding promotion and support and referrals to health care.

For more information, visit the Women, Infants & Children website. Contact WIC by calling 800-942-1636 or via email at michiganwic@michigan.gov.

# DAILY NEWS

Since 1854 — News from Montcalm County and Ionia County, Michigan

## Septic standoff

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### Outmans voice frustration over proposed statewide, uniform septic code legislation

By Cory Smith on June 09, 2023

0:00 / 0:00



Montcalm Conservation District Board Director Steve Wyckoff, left, asks a question during the May 22 Legislative Update meeting pertaining to proposed legislation that would create a statewide, uniform septic code, as Montcalm Conservation District District Manager Amber Snow listens. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

GREENVILLE — With the state of Michigan surrounded by four of the five Great Lakes, as well as serving as home to more than 11,000 lakes and ponds and more than 36,000 miles of streams, if there's one issue that tends to remain at the forefront of state legislators, it's water quality.

State Rep. Pat Outman, R-Six Lakes, said as much during the latest Legislative Update session of the spring season on May 22, in which a passionate conversation between himself and his constituents came forward on the subject of water quality, and more specifically, septic systems.

"There's nothing more important than improving our waterways in the state of Michigan," he said. "But it has to be a process that's fair."

Pat's comments came after Steve Wyckoff, director of the Montcalm Conservation District, inquired on recent legislation proposed by Democrats that aims to create a statewide, uniform septic code.



“We address problems in our cities and communities ... But we seem to neglect and ignore the 250,000 individual septic sewer systems that we have throughout the state,” Wyckoff said. “If we put the emphasis on the individual systems as we do the urban systems, wouldn’t we be much further ahead?”

Wyckoff pointed to the city of Greenville as an example of a community taking action as it is currently upgrading its wastewater treatment plant to the tune of \$33 million.

Greenville City Manager George Bosanic has stated in the past that the upgrades are being done in part following the opening of Foremost Farms in 2019 in the city’s industrial park — an addition that saw the city’s wastewater capacity crest 80%.

Per state law, the city began looking at options to expand the capacity at the wastewater plant to avoid potentially exceeding capacity as the city continues to grow in residential, commercial and industrial sectors.

Additionally, Bosanic said the expansion also comes a result of findings from water and wastewater investigative projects funded through Stormwater, Asset Management and Wastewater grant programs, the city is now on the hook to make necessary improvements to both its water and sewer systems, such as replacing lead and galvanized water lines.

While grant funds helped to identify wastewater and water issues that need a remedy, the projects being undertaken in Greenville are being paid for on the backs of property owners via increased water and sewer rates, as well as low-interest government loans.

However, with septic systems — which are utilized in more rural areas without existing infrastructure — currently only 11 of Michigan’s 83 counties require inspections. Additionally, according to the Michigan Environmental Council, nearly a third of Michigan households use septic tanks to remove wastewater and more than a quarter of those tanks are failing.

As a result, rivers and lakes, including the Flat River in Montcalm County, have been detected with the presence of bacteria such as E. Coli, which is believed to have entered the bodies of water via failing septic systems.

“I guarantee you water doesn’t get any cleaner than it does right here, going down stream,” Wyckoff said. “But if you live on the Flat River, you know what it’s like to look for E. Coli in the rivers. While it doesn’t get any cleaner than right here, when it ends up in Grand Haven or the Saginaw Bay, we end up with green algae and E. Coli. The source of that is right here. So doesn’t that behoove us and the legislature to draft legislation to take care of it up here, where the water is good?”

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While Pat said he is a supporter of keeping Michigan's waterways clean, he stopped short of supporting the Democratic-sponsored legislation. House Bills 4479 and 4480 and Senate Bills 299 and 300, introduced in April, would require inspection of residential septic wastewater systems every five years.



Former state senator Judy Emmons, left, listens as State Rep. Pat Outman, R-Six Lakes, shares his thoughts during the May 22 Legislative Update meeting on proposed legislation that would create a statewide, uniform septic code. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

Legislators are eyeing a \$35 million appropriation to create a revolving fund that would help low-income homeowners afford repairs and replacements as part of a 48% proposed budget increase for the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes & Energy (EGLE) next year; however, Pat said as the legislation sits currently drafted — without a funding source — he can't support it.

"If that's the case, if that's what the bill requires right now, I'm done, I'm out," he said. "I can't vote for something like that. If there's not an appropriation or funding component that coincides with that legislation, I can't support it."

As Rick has long operated his business, Outman Excavating, Pat said he and his father have a long history of personally dealing with failing septic systems and replacing them. Pat recognized that it is a costly endeavor for the homeowner.

"Obviously we have experience installing septic and drain fields, but I think the bigger problem is locating the failing septic systems. I think that's the biggest and most challenging problem right now — they are old and outdated," Pat said. "But how do we install new septic and drain fields? That is such a costly endeavor. We want to encourage people to do so — our waterways depend on it — but it is so burdensome for folks who live in rural areas. I don't think people understand how costly that is. You're talking \$10,000 to \$15,000 to install a new septic system, and what's the median income in Montcalm County? \$50,000?"

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), the median household income in Montcalm County is \$52,390 while individual median income is \$29,608.

Pat said he also took issue with the state having previously "bailed out" cities that have dealt with water quality issues, yet not provided funding for such issues in more rural areas.

Efforts such as Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's MI \$700 million Clean Water plan have allocated funds to address the state's aging and outmoded water infrastructure; however, Pat argues that the majority of such funding continues to be allocated for cities and communities with water and sewer infrastructure systems.

As an example, \$35 million of those funds were secured for the city of Benton Harbor to address the city's water infrastructure needs.

"We get treated as the red-headed stepchild of the state and that's really unfair," Pat said, referring to rural communities that utilize individual septic systems. "If you look at the bill sponsor, I guarantee it's some urban representative or senator that has no idea about the struggles we face in rural America. A lot of times when they have issues in the cities, we bail them out. When they need lead water line replacement, we bail them out."

Pat pointed to the unincorporated community of Riverdale in Gratiot County, which is home to about 124 property owners.

In 2020, after discovering years earlier that several failing septic systems were dumping waste directly into the Pine River, EGLE mandated that residents and businesses of the community must conduct semi annual water tests, establish a Septic District in Riverdale, perform mandatory pumping of all septic systems every seven to 10 years and establish "time of transfer" regulations to identify any deficiencies in septic systems when a property is sold.

“The problem was, the hookup for that cost more than what some of the homes there are worth,” he said. “So an unfunded mandate is very problematic, in my opinion. If you’re going to mandate folks do something, you better have appropriations to back it up because you are going to have some very costly projects.”

#### SEN. OUTMAN ALSO OPPOSED

While Pat was opposed to the legislation due to a current lack of appropriations, Rick, who was absent from May’s Legislative Update meeting, told the Daily News he was opposed to the legislation — funding or not.

“I



Montcalm Township residents Diane Fountain, left, and Karon Baird ask a question of State Rep. Pat Outman during the May 22 Legislative Update meeting held by Montcalm Community College in Greenville. Issues brought forward by constituents included conversation on proposed legislation that would create a statewide, uniform septic code. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

don’t support it, even if they give us the money,” he said.

Rick doesn’t believe a statewide septic code is needed, adding that the state’s various health departments are already responsible for enforcing septic issues.

“Number one, this legislation, it doesn’t fix anything — we already have laws in place,” he said. “There’s not one grain of sand in Michigan that isn’t governed by a septic code, somewhere. If this passes, the end result will be that we’ll have increased regulation and increased cost to our septic systems, but with no additional value to the homeowners. It’s not going to clean up the environment.”

Additionally, Rick doesn’t believe a statewide mandate would be fair, considering the diversity of the state’s landscape.

“With our soil conditions, they are so diverse in this state that a one-size-fits-all solution doesn’t do anybody any good,” he said.

Rick believes the solution is ensuring that health departments, such as the Mid-Michigan District Health Department which covers Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm counties, have adequate funding and staff to enforce their own specific septic regulations.

“We have laws in place that we don’t enforce — every district health department has a code book — that could correct this issue,” he said. “But what are we proposing to do? To create another law that we’re not going to enforce. When they say ‘statewide mandate,’ are they going to require inspections? Do they have the authority to go onto someone’s private property to do this?”

Outman believes failing septic systems should be dealt with as problems such as E. Coli entering rivers are discovered.

“You’ve got to know there’s a problem,” he said. “In Riverdale, on the Pine River, they checked the levels upstream and checked them immediately downstream. They found the main culprit was by and large human E. Coli. That is reason enough to start an investigation by the local health department, which they did in Riverdale. That community rose to the challenge and it has been taken care of. The same expectation that is on municipal systems is already on septic systems — it’s the law. It’s already illegal to have a failing septic system.”

#### HEALTH OFFICER CONCERNS

Also concerned about the potential lack of funding in legislation is Mid-Michigan District Health Department Health Officer Liz Braddock.

Braddock said if the legislation goes through as is, it will require the Health Department to take on a “huge undertaking.”

“The Health Department likes the concept of having a statewide septic code because it hits all the septic installers in the same way, but we’re a little concerned about the funding that goes with this,” she said. “We would have to charge for this program and the money would go back to the state. Money we collect from our citizens would go to the state. That’s how we would keep this flowing.

“The (legislation) that is being introduced right now requires every home to be inspected every five years,” she continued. “That is a huge undertaking. We can’t do that, with the staff we have right now. Without funding, we don’t know how it would be implemented. There’s over 250,000 septic systems in the state. What it (legislation) doesn’t address is there are homes out there that have septic systems that are failing, but there is no financial incentive for people to fix them — it’s expensive.

“Hopefully a statewide septic code will allow grants to come into Michigan. It’s very challenging right now and there needs to be more conversation with additional partners, to get this moving forward. I hope when we come back in September to these (Legislative Update) meetings, we’ll have more of a consensus.”

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## Rabies, animal bites and wild animal encounters

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*By The Daily News Staff on June 13, 2023*

Submitted by the Mid-Michigan District Health Department

0:00 / 0:00

The Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD) is reminding residents the dangers of animal bites, whether wild, stray, or domestic, as animals may be infected with rabies.

Rabies is a deadly but preventable viral disease, and most cases are in wildlife, including bats, raccoons, skunks, and foxes. Rabies can spread to people and pets through an infected, or rabid, animal's bites or scratches.

It is important for residents not to interact with (pet, play with, etc.) wild or stray animals.

Tom Clark, director of Gratiot County Animal Control says, "If you encounter a stray dog, don't run away, make any sudden movements, or look them in the eye. Quick movements can trigger their 'prey drive.'"

Residents may also encounter wild baby animals, such as a deer, fox, or raccoons. It is important to leave the animals alone.

The law requires all animal bites be reported to local Animal Control and your local Health Department. When a bite occurs, make sure to capture the following information:

- Address of where the bite occurred
- Name and phone number of the owner of the biting animal
- Rabies vaccination status of the biting animal
- A good description of the biting animal



possible rabies exposure. Domestic biting animals need to be quarantined for 10 days but may not need to be removed from their owner unless surrendered or dangerous.

In Michigan, rabies most commonly occurs in bats, therefore, it is important to prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, or other similar settings. In situations where a bat has been in close contact with people, if possible, safely confine the bat and contact your local Health Department to determine if it should be tested for rabies. A tutorial on how to catch a bat can be found on YouTube, titled: "How to Safely Catch a Bat" published by NYSDOH NY.

If testing is required, the brain of the animal must be intact. The local Health Department or Animal Control can provide you with best practices to safely deal with the bat.

If residents are unable to contact their local Health Department or Animal Control, and the captured bat is no longer living, the animal should never be put in the freezer. Freezing will delay test results from the state lab. Specimens must be refrigerated until ready to ship.

For further information, visit [Michigan.gov/Rabies](https://Michigan.gov/Rabies). To speak to your local MMDHD Communicable Disease (CD) Nurse, their contact information is listed below. For after hours, weekend, and holiday emergencies, use the After-Hours Emergency Pager.

• **Montcalm County:** Jennifer Johnson, (989) 831-3615

• **After-Hours Emergency Pager:** (989) 276-0260

To reach Montcalm County Animal Control, call (989) 831-7302.

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### Eye on opioids

The nine members of a newly formed committee to help determine how opioid lawsuit settlement dollars should be spent in...



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Hello, fellow readers. My 17th annual 2023 Summer Book List will be in five parts. Yes, that is right. I did say...



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