

HOPE

Introduction

My name is Greg Duckworth. I am a County Commissioner in Southern West Virginia, a board member of the West Virginia First Foundation (WVFF), and a 26-year retired veteran of the West Virginia State Police.

I spent my law enforcement career in the heart of the opioid epidemic, an area once known as "The Coal Fields." Today, I want to share some firsthand experiences on how this crisis has devastated families, affected our aging population, and where we must focus our efforts moving forward.

State Trooper Experience 1: 2012

In 2012, 17-year-old Cheyenne Martin reported to police that her father and two younger siblings were missing. She had already lost her mother, Kerri Hendrix, who—under the influence of OxyContin—wandered into a highway and was fatally struck by a truck.

During the investigation, police found that her father, Hendrix, was lured into a trap by a drug dealer named Belknap, who owed him money. Hendrix, his girlfriend, and his two youngest children were ambushed and murdered. Their bodies were discarded as if they were worthless.

A decade later, Cheyenne herself died of an opioid overdose, leaving behind three small children. Entire families are being erased by addiction.

This is not just a crisis of individuals—it’s a crisis of generations. Children lose parents. Grandparents are forced back into parenting. Communities crumble.

State Trooper Experience 2: 2023

The second story involves a single mother in her early 30s with four children: a nine-year-old, a seven-year-old, and three-year-old twins.

For years, she lived with her mother, who helped care for the children. Recently, she had moved into her own place—a single-wide trailer within walking distance of her mother’s home.

At night, after dinner, she would take the three-year-old twins home while leaving the older children with their grandmother, who ensured they got to school each morning. The twins were described as full of life, radiating joy, as most three-year-olds do.

One night, the mother put the twins to bed. By the time she checked on them again, they were deceased. Autopsies revealed multiple drugs in their systems, including lethal amounts of fentanyl. The neglect was so severe that rigor mortis had already set in before she realized what had happened.

The children's grandmother had already lost her husband to cancer. She fought for custody of her remaining grandchildren but was unsuccessful. She is, however, allowed to see them with the help of Child Protective Services.

The mother is currently in jail, awaiting trial for two counts of child neglect resulting in death.

The Burden on Our Seniors

In West Virginia, **1 in 7** children loses a parent to overdose or incarceration by age 18. With the **highest rate** of neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS), many of these children have medical and developmental challenges.

Grandparents—who thought they were retiring—are now primary caregivers. They face:

- Physical Strain – Raising young children at an advanced age.
- Financial Hardship – Many live on fixed incomes and struggle to meet basic needs.
- Emotional Toll – Raising children while grieving the loss of their own.

Many do this off the record to avoid the foster care system, meaning they receive no financial or legal support.

West Virginia First Foundation: Supporting Grandfamilies and the Aging Population

I'm proud to serve as a board member for the West Virginia First Foundation (WVFF) and to be part of an organization that is making a real difference in our communities.

WVFF is committed to addressing the full impact of the opioid epidemic, including the burdens placed on West Virginia's aging population. Recognizing that addiction does not just affect the individual but entire families, WVFF is dedicated to supporting grandfamilies—grandparents raising grandchildren—by providing the resources and assistance to child advocacy and youth prevention programs.

We recognize that this crisis does not end with one generation—it continues to ripple outward. By investing in solutions that support the full family system, WVFF is helping to break the cycle of addiction, ensuring that grandparents raising grandchildren are not left to struggle alone.

The Fight Against Addiction: Where We Must Focus

Having served on the front lines of this epidemic, I believe that our response must be **comprehensive**. This includes:

- Treatment Access – Making detox and rehab services more available.
- Prevention & Education – Stopping addiction before it starts.
- Recovery Support – Ensuring people have pathways to long-term sobriety.
- Grandfamilies & Child Advocacy – Protecting children and supporting caregivers.
- Economic Recovery – People in recovery need jobs, stability, and hope.

We must also fix systemic failures, such as:

- Underreported overdose deaths.
- Inconsistent Narcan use documentation.
- Recovery homes misclassifying overdoses.

Closing Statement: Restoring Hope

I believe that hope can be restored.

Substance use disorder is our enemy. It is destroying the very core of the American way—**God, family, and self**.

To win this war, we must:

- Ensure the love and support of the church.
- Reunite families and emphasize the importance of family values.
- Bring back support systems that give people a sense of self-worth.

This crisis is more than just statistics. These are real people with names, faces, and stories. If there is one thing I want you to take away from today, it is this: behind every number, there is a human being.

We must act. **We must restore hope.**

Thank you.