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METHADONE PROJECT PROPONENT HOPES TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF ADDICTION AND CRIME IN U.S. PRISONS

Mark Parrino, M.P.A. Will Use Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Innovators Award To Conduct High-Impact Project

(Princeton, NJ, July 23, 2003) – Approximately 1.5 million Americans are arrested on drug charges every year – many of them intravenous users of heroin or other opiates (opioids). Methadone maintenance treatment is not available to most, and the lack of medical therapy helps perpetuate a drug subculture in American prisons, as well as a cycle of violent crime and recidivism.

Mark Parrino wants to change all of that, through a project funded by his recently conferred Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Innovators Combating Substance Abuse award. Parrino and four others were recently named Innovators as part of a program that recognizes leaders in the fields of substance abuse prevention, treatment, and policy development, brings attention to their groundbreaking work and provides an opportunity for them to undertake projects they might not otherwise be able to complete.

“What I want to do is use the Rikers Island model to explore methods of increasing access to methadone treatment and other FDA-approved replacement pharmacotherapies,” says Parrino, who is President of the American Association for the Treatment of Opioid Dependence, Inc. (AATOD), which is headquartered in New York City. “Programs like the one at Rikers significantly reduce recidivism. In addition, in some prison systems, up to 55% of the population are IV drug users and more than half are positive for HIV or hepatitis C. Denying treatment is not just inhumane, but poor public policy that does not benefit the inmate, the criminal justice system, or society as a whole.”

A Model Program to Address Addiction and Crime

According to Parrino, New York’s Rikers Island is the only correctional system in the United States that treats heroin-dependent inmates with methadone, referring them to treatment programs upon release. The Key Extended Entry Program (KEEP) program, which treated nearly 4,000 opiate-dependent inmates with methadone in 2000, has been part of the Rikers Island health services system since 1987. The program has repeatedly demonstrated decreased recidivism, and 76% of all inmate patients reported to their assigned methadone treatment after release from jail.

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Mark Parrino/ 2

“It makes sense to expand access to this kind of service for people under legal supervision throughout the United States,” Parrino says.

Parrino plans first to conduct a randomized study of inmates throughout the country to determine what percentage are opioid dependent. Next, he will develop partnerships with criminal justice organizations and federal agencies in order to increase access to care in more facilities on a pilot basis. The pilot will draw on the principals of the KEEP program, and create linkages to outpatient substance abuse treatment programs. The last phase of the proposed project is evaluation of whether – and by how much -- the program results in reduced recidivism. Parrino believes these results will lead to more research, and potential adoption of this approach in some prison systems.

Leading the Way on Proven Medical Treatments for Opiate Addiction

Parrino received the Innovators award due to his leadership in this area and is just the person to make this project work. He helped to develop the first standards for the use of methadone in addiction treatment programs across the U.S. and is perhaps the nation’s foremost authority on developing effective practices to treat opiate addiction through proven pharmacotherapies such as methadone and buprenorphine. Federal and state agencies, Congress, and state legislatures continue to call on him to provide information and advice on methadone treatment.

Among his many accomplishments, Parrino has developed quality of care standards that are used virtually everywhere a methadone treatment program is to be found. He wrote and edited the book on treatment protocols. He also led the development of the State Methadone Treatment Guidelines for the U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, which have been translated into French, Italian and Spanish for use in 10 nations. He has since been called on by the U.S. Department of Justice, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, and the Drug Enforcement Administration to draft materials that guide drug courts and other components of the criminal justice system working with persons addicted to opiates.

Parrino also helped lay the groundwork for opening the first methadone clinics in Arkansas, Vermont, and Maine, and has worked with state agency staff in Massachusetts and other states to resolve issues that threatened to decrease access to methadone treatment. He is also active on the community level, working with community leaders to obtain approval to open new clinics. In the past 10 years, the number of clinics offering medication-assisted treatment has increased from about 750 to 1,100, while the number of patients has increased from 120,000-125,000 to more than 205,000.

“Methadone is a medication that positively transforms a person, taking him or her from death’s doorstep to a genuine sense of recovery and emotional health,” he says. “And the physical recovery takes only weeks and is remarkable.”

Parrino’s leadership of the field comes after many years of working in patient care, which exposed him to the need for effective and compassionate addiction treatment. “I’ve seen addiction up close, as a treatment provider,” he says. “I know how it can cut a family to ribbons. It leaves changes and impressions that can take years to deal with.”

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Becoming a Central Figure in the Field

In the mid-1980s Parrino used his experience as a treatment provider and administrator to found the Northeast Regional Methadone Treatment Coalition. Formation of the coalition served as a critical milestone in bringing together the methadone maintenance community. Its first regional conference drew more than 500 people representing nine states in the northeast region, who treated the majority of methadone treatment patients in the eastern seaboard. Ongoing conferences developed by Parrino proved to be an effective organizing tool for the field, as representatives from throughout the country began to participate. The coalition evolved into the American Methadone Treatment Association in 1990, and eventually became the American Association for the Treatment of Opioid Dependence (AATOD). The organization now works with 21 statewide chapters and with individual program members in 11 other states. These groups represent more than 800 treatment programs responsible for treating over 180,000 patients on any given day. The conference, held every 18 months, now attracts about 1,400 participants from across the nation and abroad, including high level federal and state officials as well as practitioners and individuals in recovery.

Changing Minds Through Persuasion and Scientific Evidence

When General Barry McCaffrey was named Director of the White House Office on National Drug Control Policy (“drug czar”) in the Clinton administration, he was opposed to methadone treatment. Parrino, in conjunction with the Office and other organizations, convened several meetings with the general, presenting findings from decades of research that documented methadone treatment’s effectiveness in reducing substance abuse and associated public health problems, such as HIV infection and hepatitis C. These meetings and discussions with many of the leading researchers and experts on methadone maintenance helped General McCaffrey to reevaluate his position. The general then became one of the nation’s most visible and outspoken supporters of methadone treatment. When New York City’s then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani attacked methadone treatment in 1998 as ineffective, General McCaffrey publicly disagreed with the mayor, articulating his strong support and helping to save many methadone treatment programs in the city. Forty thousand patients are treated in these programs. Also as a result of the general’s support, federal policy changes were implemented, including a first-time accreditation requirement for narcotic treatment programs.

Innovators Combating Substance Abuse is a national program of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that recognizes and rewards those who have made substantial, innovative contributions of national significance in the field of substance abuse. Each award includes a grant of \$300,000, which is used to conduct a project over a period of up to three years that advances the field. The program addresses problems related to alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs, through education, advocacy, treatment and policy research and reform at the national, state and local levels. The Innovators program is run by a national program office at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

For additional information on the Innovators Combating Substance Abuse program, please visit the Web site: www.SAInnovators.org. For a complete press kit, please visit <http://newsroom.mbooth.com/sainnovators/>.

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NOTE TO LOCAL EDITORS: Mark Parrino is a resident of Bloomfield, New Jersey.