

Head of the downtown ambassador project, Andrew LeSturgeon (center) talks with workers from a local business in Burlington

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Street Teams

Two Community-Backed Initiatives Work to Make Downtown Burlington Safer for All

It's a critical moment for downtown Burlington. Viral videos have documented open drug use, people pushing shopping carts through the streets or sleeping in tents on city greenbelts, groups loitering on the steps of downtown churches. Merchants say shoplifting has increased.

In response to the problems plaguing the city, two different but interconnected initiatives sponsored in part by the Pomerleau Family Foundation are offering reasons for hope: The Downtown

Ambassador Project and the Downtown Health Project.

The former is working to create a sense of community and security among downtown business owners and employees; the latter offers low-barrier access to medical care and recovery support — backed by caring case managers with street cred.

All of these people are working night and day to make the state's largest city safer for everyone who lives and works here.

That's where Devine met LeSturgeon. He had worked with the residents and local officials to bring safety to a block that was experiencing more harm than most in Burlington, and he felt he could do the same for the greater downtown. Devine saw potential in the idea and worked with him to make it happen.

Earlier this year, Devine approached some of the city's largest commercial property owners and asked them to fund the Downtown Ambassador Project as a pilot. The Pomerleau Family Foundation is the lead contributor and now an important strategic partner. The Project officially launched in June.

Devine said she worked closely with LeSturgeon to introduce him to BBA member businesses. "He's been a good study. He gets it," she said.

On paper, he doesn't seem like an obvious fit for the job. Though he studied at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, afterwards LeSturgeon worked in upscale New York City restaurants, then moved to Vermont in 2012 and became the pastry chef for highly regarded Hen of the Wood, and eventually for his own business, Monarch & The Milkweed.

His culinary skills don't exactly translate to this new role, but his experience in hospitality and his entrepreneurial drive have helped. He's also personally invested in the work. He lives on lower Church Street and has seen the increase in homelessness and open drug use — along with the criminal activity it brings — up close.

LeSturgeon has also been a resource for people actively using drugs who are interested in finding treatment, and others who need medical care. He's directed numerous people to the Downtown Health Project on Bank Street, which operates a walk-in clinic and provides case management services.

LeSturgeon has received testimonials from the homeless community downtown, too. "Andrew helps us in many ways," Mills said. "He is blunt and to the point and truthful. He's helping many recovering addicts and some who have relapsed and people who are inside of active addiction and desperate to change."

LeSturgeon is also focused on collecting data. For example, downtown businesses say that retail theft has skyrocketed in recent years, but Burlington's official crime statistics don't reflect the increase. That's because merchants don't report the thefts due to the cumbersome reporting process, Devine said.

LeSturgeon is now advocating for the city to create an easier way to report retail theft by having clerks fill

phone buzzed. A well-known shoplifter had just been spotted walking toward the Church Street Marketplace. Someone had posted a photo of her to the downtown workers' and business owners' group chat — "she's one of the largest shoplifters in the state," he explained.

LeSturgeon hustled over to Golden Hour Gift Co. and tipped off the young woman staffing the store's outdoor display. She knew who he was talking about immediately and was on alert. "Thank you so much," she replied. "I appreciate it."

Kelly Devine, director of the Burlington Business Association, said that making young people working in the city feel safe and supported was "the number one reason" the Downtown Ambassador Project was created.

It started to take shape after a meeting during the winter at Decker Towers. Elected officials and public safety leaders came to the building to hear about challenges residents were facing.

Garden Vermont, echoing a sentiment shared by many downtown workers.

Mark Bouchett, owner of Homeport, has witnessed the ambassador's impact firsthand. "Andrew's presence alone has served to prevent many situations from escalating," he noted. "I've seen potential thieves have a change of heart when they realize store clerks aren't alone." It probably helps that LeSturgeon is six foot five.

The Ambassador Project has an office on the top block of Church Street, but LeSturgeon is more often out and about. On a recent fall morning he could be found leaning up against a light post at the corner of Cherry and Church Streets talking with Mills, a homeless downtown dweller. They exchanged a friendly handshake before Mills walked off to join some friends.

A few minutes later, LeSturgeon's

An Unusual Ambassador Supports Downtown Businesses

Andrew LeSturgeon is Burlington's Downtown Ambassador, a new position funded via the Burlington Business Association by members of the local business community, with lead funding through the Pomerleau Foundation.

The affable 41-year-old can talk to anybody. He spends his time chatting up the people who live and work downtown — employees at local stores and restaurants, business owners, cops and city councilors, as well as people living on the street. He connects them to each other, or to whatever services they might need.

According to local merchants, the Downtown Ambassador Project is working.

"We feel so much better with Andrew around," said Jana Qualey of Home &

out a pre-populated online form on their phones. He regularly texts with city councilors and staffers in the mayor's office.

LeStourgeon also consults with business owners on ways to increase security, making their properties safer for all.

"I think I'm in a good routine. I think I've found my niche," LeStourgeon said.

The next step for the Ambassador Project is finding the money to support it for another year. Devine would like to add another position — someone who would focus on collecting relevant data so that LeStourgeon could get out and talk to people more.

Devine is pleased with LeStourgeon's progress, and eager to build on his success. "If we can commit to the ambassador project, it will really make a difference downtown," she said.

Compassionate caseworkers and a walk-in clinic build trust and offer a pathway to recovery

There's an ambitious effort underway at the corner of Bank and St. Paul Streets in Burlington that's helping to stabilize the city's downtown district. It's not the 10-story building going up where the mall used to be — it's the Downtown Health Project, a collaboration between Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform and the Johnson Health Center. The initiative provides recovery services, robust case management and a walk-in clinic serving people downtown who lack stable housing. Many of their clients are actively using opioids or stimulants — or both.

Patricia Pomerleau, a Pomerleau Foundation trustee and former hospital administrator, sees great promise in the program. "I'm particularly proud of the way it has come together," she said.

Tom Dalton, director of Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform, explained its approach: "We're helping people transition from active, chaotic use to stable, sustained recovery. If you won't work with people in active use, how are you going to help them transition?"

Dalton has decades of experience in this field. He founded the Safe Recovery program, run by the Howard Center, which provides a needle exchange and other support for those with substance use disorder. In fact, Safe Recovery is where he met Jess Kirby, now client



Geoff Butler, Eva Casey, Tom Dalton, Sarah-Ashley Simmons, Caroline Butler and Jess Kirby in Burlington

services director for Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform; Kirby first came to the recovery program as a client. Through it, she was able to achieve and maintain her own recovery, and she spent eight years as a staff member. She left Safe Recovery two years ago to work with Dalton as a case manager. Their team now includes case manager Sarah Ashley Simmons.

Kirby's experience gives her credibility among those she works with. A bulletin board in the office is covered with notes from people she serves: "I love you Jess. You have helped me through so much," reads one.

That help could be anything from giving someone a ride to a court date or therapist appointment to being present with a client in the emergency room after a traumatic event. Kirby helps them understand the systems they're caught up in, and helps health care workers and other professionals better understand her clients' needs. She describes her work as "filling the very big gaps" in the social service infrastructure.

The Johnson Health Center is a key partner in that work. Started in Johnson by Caroline Butler, a nurse practitioner, and her husband, Geoff,

the center offers compassionate, trauma-informed care and addiction services in Johnson. It started its work in Burlington by running pop-up clinics at the Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform office to help with the rising incidence of wounds caused by the use of xylazine, an animal tranquilizer.

The health center's work in Burlington has grown organically since. It has

now established a full medical office at 117 Bank Street, next door to Kirby and Dalton's building, which provides a wide range of medical services, from low-barrier access to medications that treat opioid use disorder to comprehensive preventative care, and help managing chronic conditions like diabetes. Caroline can write prescriptions.

She can start or update an electronic health record connected to the same system used by the University of Vermont Medical Center, so other medical professionals don't have to start over with a patient in the ER.

Caroline is presently in Burlington two days a week, but is available for telemedicine consultation on days when she's not there. Her hours on Bank Street will expand soon with the addition of a new nurse practitioner.

"We know how important it is for patients to get the care they need quickly," she said. "Jess, Sarah Ashley and Tom are amazing at making sure our patients get connected fast."

That not only helps their clients, it helps the rest of downtown, too. For example, Butler might be able to renew a prescription for a client suffering from psychosis or schizophrenia. If that individual can't pick up the medication themselves because they've previously been barred from entering local pharmacies, Kirby can get it for them. Often they don't have anyone else to help. "We are the go-to people for so many people," Kirby said.

Helping someone stay on their meds cuts down on calls to police or first responders. "Giving people treatment for psychosis is really important for the community," Kirby said. It can also help lead them into drug treatment, housing, and stable employment. That's the goal.

"Jess and Tom are passionate experts in what they do and connected to more resources than any provider that I know," LeStourgeon, the Downtown Ambassador, said. "I trust that clients I bring to them have the best chance possible to start on a healthier path."

The Downtown Health Project got off the ground this spring with a \$300,000 grant from the Pomerleau Family Foundation. It allowed Dalton and Kirby to hire another case worker. The Butlers have recently hired a nurse practitioner and are hoping to hire more in the future.

Pomerleau sees the Downtown Health Project as a good investment because it builds on an existing framework and has the focus of caring for the entire downtown community through comprehensive physical and social care for the city's opioid-use-disorder population. "Our goal is to get individuals off the streets and into long term treatment. It won't be easy, but I believe the Downtown Health Project has the formula we need — caring for the health of the entire community, including our Marketplace, through focus on comprehensive care for those with substance use disorders."

The most optimistic sign, said Dalton, is that they're seeing clients returning. "We're having a lot of regular contact," he said. Helping clients stabilize their health is critical to saving lives — and improving the quality of life downtown. ■



Notes on the bulletin board in the VCJR office

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