GREENWICH — As Glennard Brown inched into a parking spot near Jackie Robinson Park in Stamford on Thursday morning, he zipped up his jacket and grabbed a “rover” kit from the back of his van.

The kit contained a sterile crack pipe, a cleaning device for crack paraphernalia [known as a “chore boy”], women’s and men’s condoms, medicated lip ointment and candies for a dry mouth.

Brown and his colleague Beverly Waczek locked the van and crossed the street, where they approached a group of three, who ate lunch on a nearby park bench.

Teams from Liberation Programs travel across Fairfield County multiple times per week in the van, offering on-the-ground services to those who need them — from Greenwich into Bridgeport.

The van travels to areas where active drug users might congregate — with services accessible to all — including those who are uninsured. And it goes where its presence is requested.

“The overall goal is really just us getting out there and letting people know that we are available,” said Maggie Young, chief recovery officer for Liberation Programs, an addiction
treatment organization with services spanning the Fairfield County, and offices in Greenwich, Stamford, Norwalk and Bridgeport.

Van employees often wear identical t-shirts that match the outward appearance of the vehicle — tie-dyed and inscribed with the slogan, “Liberation Programs Wellness Resources.”

When team members approach potential clients, they’re calm and conversational and they stick to describing the services they offer without assuming the person uses drugs or is needing treatment.

“Whatever their ask may be, with our partnerships, we can refer them to many places,” Young continued. “People ask what we’re doing on (the van) and it’s also the attraction of the design that really kind of has people wanting to ask more questions.”

Last month in Greenwich, Young, Brown and two other Liberation Programs employees pulled up outside their offices at the YMCA to discuss services offered on the van, which include a syringe exchange program, funded by the state Department of Public Health.

While it operates — on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. and on Thursday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. — individuals can approach the van with used syringes and exchange them for clean ones, said Joanne Montgomery, chief clinical officer.

The arrangement is widely stigmatized but it’s growing in acceptance as the van becomes more well-known in the county, said Waczek. The program does not encourage drug use, but instead “builds a therapeutic bridge” with clients by keeping them safer until they’re ready to reach out and get treatment, said Waczek.

“The goal of the program is to make sure if someone is injecting drugs that they’re doing it with clean syringes to prevent the spread of HIV and hepatitis,” said Montgomery.

The state has received millions of dollars to address the opiate crisis and Connecticut leaders have spearheaded many different initiatives to fight the epidemic, said Montgomery.

Using federal funds from the State Opioid Response grant, the Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services provides about $200,000 per year to operate three vans and one RV in the state, including the Liberation van, said Diana Shaw, public information officer for DMHAS.

The van has regular stops (Wednesday, 9 a.m.-2 p.m. in Lione Park, Stamford; Monday, 9 a.m.-3p.m. in Washington Park, Bridgeport) but can be seen in other places, including Greenwich, when services are requested by entities from police departments and churches to beauty salons, shelters and 12-step programs among others, said Young.
“Opiate addiction is rampant in every city and every town throughout the state of Connecticut, so wherever our services are needed we will come,” said Montgomery.

The vans are stocked with Narcan kits for people experiencing opiate overdoses, and team members who can prescribe buprenorphine, a medication that helps lessen the cravings for opiates, she said.

“There was nothing like this back” when Montgomery was struggling with opiate addiction in the early 1990s, she said.

“Back then, when I was recovering, they didn’t even have buprenorphine and it was really hard,” she said. “I struggled with addiction for 15 years before I was able to finally come into this agency (Liberation Programs) and turn my life around.”

Montgomery isn’t the only person on the van team who has remained sober for more than two decades, after receiving treatment services from Liberation Programs.

On Feb. 6, Young celebrated 28 years of sobriety. She agreed there were no services similar to the van while she was struggling.

“It was either (traditional) treatment or you ended up in jail,” she said. “There was not any prevention or education.”

Brown started treatment at Liberation Programs in 1992 and has been “clean” ever since, he said.

All three openly share their experiences to help comfort clients who may be skeptical or fearful of the van’s services, they said.

“It’s important for people to see the recovery side of addiction,” said Montgomery.

“When people talk about addiction, they’re only thinking about people in active addiction, but we know that people recover,” she said. “We’re prime examples of people who have recovered and have dedicated our life back to helping those just like us. So, it’s meaningful work that we do and we know that everyone can recover if they have the opportunity and the chance to do that — and that’s what we’re trying to bring to people - hope, opportunity, and the chance to get well.”

For more information about treatment services through Liberation Programs, call 1-855-LIB-PROGS. Organization leaders also invite the public to donate or become volunteers with the program.

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