U.S. deaths from drug abuse are setting records, despite sustained public attention and billions of dollars spent over the last few years. In 2017, 72,000 Americans died of overdose—14,000 more than the total U.S. deaths in the Vietnam War. This plague has lowered average American life expectancy, spiked medical costs, and caused millions of people to drop out of the workforce.

In reporting trips over the last few years to cover the opiate crisis, I’ve spoken with countless people who know someone with an addiction, someone who overdosed, or someone who went to jail for stealing to support a habit. One family I interviewed spent $200,000 on their son’s rehab. He has had 13 relapses.

Drug and alcohol recovery is not something this quick-fix nation has figured out. It often takes years, or fails to materialize at all. And loving support can be hard for many addicts to find during their struggles. That’s where Recovery House of Worship in Brooklyn comes in.

Emily Belz is a reporter for World magazine.
Edwin Colon, RHOW’s senior pastor, is 27 years clean after a collision with drugs that started at the age of 11. Amidst today’s narcotics surge, he argues, every region needs at least one church focused on helping people step away from addiction. Most of the congregants at RHOW are recovering addicts. All of the pastors had drug problems in the past.

Church members tell me that RHOW is a place they never feel disparaged. The pastors preach about sin, the need for God’s help in overcoming it, and the necessity for individuals to change their behaviors and attitudes. But “we never look at the people we’re serving as different from us,” says Colon. “It’s just us in a different year.” One person’s addiction crisis might have reached a head in 1999, while another’s is ongoing now.

Grit is greater than snot

Leaders of the Recovery House of Worship all work multiple jobs to make ends meet: The old Baptist church in Brooklyn where they are headquartered burned in a three-alarm fire back in 2010, and has only been temporarily patched here and there since the disaster. Today’s worshipers gather in the basement, a lavender room that has only been temporarily patched here and there since the disaster. Today’s worshipers gather in the basement, a lavender room that has only been temporarily patched here and there since the disaster.

The church encourages participants to make a service commitment (it has a homeless outreach that gives away clean clothes and offers meals from a mobile soup kitchen). Every individual is assigned a mentor and receives regular one-on-one discipleship, personal and spiritual guidance, and financial counseling. The worship services exude a powerful family warmth for persons who often have burned all their bridges with loved ones and have no one else to fall back on.

The RHOW approach has gained the attention of prominent Christian development organization Hope for New York. It vetted RHOW and added the church to its network as a partner—offering technical assistance and volunteer coordination, and

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Colon says his worship space has “the ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.” chairs beneath a Bible verse: “With God, camps in its basement. In the meantime, spirit-filled fellowship that currently of its valuable Brooklyn real estate building. Its leaders would like to find a partner willing to repair and expand the historic building, turning much of New City Network, another umbrella organization that promotes urban church planters, with support from foundations that operate in the city. Ramos who co-founded the Recovery House of Worship with Edwin Colon. Ramos started using drugs, and Hook met him in a 12-Step program. The man started coming to church, even playing in the worship band. But he started using drugs again, and one month later a train ran over him as he stood on the Metro North tracks.

“This was a guy we all loved,” says Hook. “We’ve had some really heartbreaking experiences like that. Some guys that we want to help, that we begin to do life with, that we worship God with together. We help them get clean. And then we’re doing their memorial service. But that’s the reality of addiction.”

During church, spaghetti is cooking in the kitchen, and after the service, worshipers sit down for lunch, along with people who pop in off the street, knowing that RHOW regularly offers delicious meals. Hook is talking to a new guy at the table, telling him about a discipleship group that meets every Thursday. “I’ll try to be there,” the man says. “It’s a Bible study?”

“It’s a Bible study. Artie makes really bad coffee,” adds Hook, laughing.

Hoping to reclaim what drugs have cost him It is a rainy Monday morning, and buckets scattered around the ruined sanctuary are catching the drips that come through the damaged roof. Down in the less drippy basement, 29-year-old James Barrett has just woken up in his room. He reads a devotional, then grabs coffee in the fellowship hall where church members are serving breakfast to the homeless.

A Harlem local, Barrett is new to the church. Three months ago he was living on the street, his body hollowed out from the reality of addiction.

Now Ruiz gets up to speak to the 150-person gathering, telling her story of chemical imprisonment. “God woke me up,” she says through tears. “Don’t ever give up.” Then Colon preaches from the Sermon on the Mount, and speaks directly to those who want to follow Jesus: “Listen to me. We do this together. We don’t walk with Christ alone.”

As the service is wrapping up, Chris Hook is standing to the side. He is a recovered opiate addict with tattoos covering his arms and neck. In 2011, he was in 12-Step programs but couldn’t shake his demon. Then he met Pastor Raymond Ramos, a former crack addict who co-founded the Recovery House of Worship with Edwin Colon. Ramos kept asking Hook to come to church, but Hook said no multiple times, before finally agreeing to give it a try. A little while after he began attending he relapsed again. Then people from the church came to my house,” says Hook. “They knocked on my door. They were like, Where is that guy? That really touched me.”

Hook lived in the church for two years, then joined the staff as an assistant to Colon. The two of them are now the only paid employees; all others serve as volunteers. “I really love our church,” he says, even though it regularly brings him face-to-face with disorder, depression, and even death. Many addicts think they can heal themselves, he says. They will get clean for a while, as he knows from experience, then forget the realities of when they were homeless or emaciated from drug use, and plunge back into the abyss.

Hook remembers one man who became a friend. He was a nurse who started using drugs, and Hook met him in a 12-Step program. The man started coming to church, even playing in the worship band. But he started using drugs again, and one month later a train ran over him as he stood on the Metro North tracks.

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A fellow named Sid strides in wearing pink sunglasses and a cigarette behind his ear. Another man in red pants and a purple striped hoodie nervously fidgets with a Rubix cube throughout the meal. People are talking about how one of the breakfast regulars in his 80s is getting forced out of his apartment by a rent hike. The cook says he’s been checking on the man, bringing him lunch and dinner in Tupperware, and offers to go later in the day to ask him about the rent situation.

A slight man named Sledge Smith sits at one table. Before falling on hard times he worked in tech start-ups. He became close friends with Negron, and has been going to the church for about three months. “It’s the most dilapidated church I’ve ever been to,” says Smith. “But also the most welcoming place I’ve ever been.”

Just before the food is served, Pastor Pedro Rodriguez—who was a heroin addict pulled off the street by one of the other pastors 14 years ago—offers a devotion from Psalm 23. “Our desire is to be set free quickly from trouble, trial, or heartache,” says Rodriguez. “So why is it taking so long? Who has these questions?” The room returns a chorus of affirmations.

After the meal, Barrett changes into his work clothes, then returns to the kitchen. A couple who have been in the church for a long time, Gene and Betsy Mitchell, have taken him under their wing. Gene employs Barrett in his home-renovation business. The poet in Barrett amuses himself with the metaphor that he’s fixing up apartments as part of his restoration of his own soul.

He and the Mitchells have a special connection. Because their son has struggled with addiction, Barrett now sees the parental side of the trauma. It has opened his eyes to the pain he has caused others. Meanwhile, the couple are understanding more of what afflicts their son.

“You can find family outside your family,” Barrett says. Some of his cousins are “just waiting to hear that I’m smoking crack again.” His mom “doesn’t understand addiction.” She’ll tell him, “Why can’t you stop getting high? Are you that weak?”

“I feel like Recovery House of Worship is my family.” He leaves for work. On this day he is five months clean.

A family outside your family

The regular breakfasts at the Recovery House of Worship have no strings attached, but they can become the intake mechanism if someone wants help or a referral. As the neighborhood has gentrified there’s been a surge of homeless individuals showing up. George Negron, a retired police officer and member of the church who coordinates the breakfasts and knows everyone there, welcomes all comers. As he and his team get to know people, though, they push them not to just settle for breakfast, but to plug in to some of the other help the church has to offer—to “break camp and move,” as he puts it.