

Public Health Social Work & the Community

First-line responders are often the people who will see a public health crisis earliest. In 2003, this could not be more accurate for public health social worker **Will Halpin** (SSW '03, SPH '06). Working at Fenway Community Health Clinic in Boston, Will began to see case after case of crystal methamphetamine abuse among gay and bisexual men. At the time, Will explains, crystal meth abuse wasn't seen anywhere else in Boston.

Recognizing the need for rapid intervention, Will relied on his public health training to research empirically validated treatment methods for crystal meth addiction. As a result, he began incorporating the Matrix Model into his substance abuse treatment groups. Not long after, his work caught the eye of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the Boston Public Health Commission, both of whom saw the critical need to train their own people in the best treatment and prevention models around crystal meth addiction. Contracted by both agencies to train their people, Will developed curricula that was built on empirically validated treatments, as well as public health perspectives. A critical piece, he explained, was tailoring his materials to first-line responders: "child welfare workers who were going into homes and needed to be able to identify if this was a crystal meth lab; parole and other police officers who needed to know what crystal meth was and how to intervene in a domestic situation; and primary care physicians who were seeing people with other medical problems but crystal meth was the underlying factor."

Making communities across Massachusetts safer and better prepared to respond to a growing public health issue, Will credits his training in social work and public health. "I appreciate that I'm a social worker working in public health because I can do the micro interventions, and can think big and also act in an individual way. Do other health professionals really know the nuances and subtleties of working with groups and individuals? What does motivational enhancement really look like when you're sitting across from someone? There's only so much standardization that you can do."

Furthermore, a public health perspective has helped improve Will's work and programming. "I can think clinically with people, but I also have intervention and prevention. The advantage to this training is to think beyond crisis management, for example. What can we do to prevent things from getting worse? Prevention and intervention, it's a marriage between the two."



Will Halpin

The Campaign for Public Health Social Work
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