**Tipping the Pain Scale – Response from Angela Maxell, PhD, Substance Abuse Prevention Block Grant Manager at NCDHHS**

**My initial response to the stories is one of HOPE**. While it is true that addiction is merciless and does not discriminate, the film highlights the fact that communities continue to fight through evidence and innovative practices to turn the tide of addiction towards recovery. Progress is being made locally within communities as well as legislatively at state and federal levels. There is hope in knowing that recovery happens everyday for millions of people. There is hope in the fact that efforts to delay and prevent the onset of substance use among youth are effective and work. As a 25 year+ substance use prevention professional, this film only confirms my hope that research, resources, and practice will align to ensure that communities have what they need to work “upstream” to stop the flow or pipeline of young people and adults falling into the river of addiction; to mitigate the impact of “addiction epidemic” on families and communities ; to meaningfully address the root causes of addiction (the individual and systemic “whys”).

**The film ends with a powerful quote by Archbishop Desmond Tutu which captures the foundation of primary prevention practice and serves as a reminder of the lens through which we should frame all discussions of addressing substance use across the continuum**. “There comes a point when we need to just stop pulling people out of the river.  We need to go upstream and find out why they are falling in.”  I would suggest that research, funding, and services must continue to pull people out of the river; however, equitable attention (research and funding) must be given to primary prevention efforts which are uniquely different than (yet complimentary to) harm reduction. As Mr. Green states in the film, if we have gotten it right…prevention would be intrinsic to our work as addiction professionals and not a “random outside thing that must be inserted into the system.”  As we continue to work towards full parity of substance use and mental health with physical health, it is my hope that substance use prevention will garner parity with substance use treatment and recovery in terms of funding and legislation.

**NOTE ON COMMUNITY-BASED PREVENTION**

Primary prevention is a vital part of the continuum of substance use disorder services. Research continues to show that the majority of adults with substance use disorders began prior to the age of 18 years. As with any other chronic health disease, PREVENTION IS KEY to ensuring positive long-term outcomes. We would do ourselves a disservice by minimizing the potential impact prevention programs and policies have and will have on mitigating the opioid crisis and the addiction crisis as a whole. We can look at prevention efforts such as tobacco-free school campuses; smoke-free restaurants and bars legislation; medication take-back events; and other efforts to reduce access of prescription medications to see broad reaching community impact. The Division of Mental Health currently supports evidence-based and innovative primary prevention across all 100 counties in NC including but not limited to youth education for preschool – high school aged youth; specialized services for youth at greater risk for substance use due to various factors; parent education programs; efforts to reduce access to alcohol, tobacco and prescription medications; coalition/collaborative efforts to promote healthy community norms through advocacy, awareness and education; as well as communication campaigns to shift public perceptions, norms and behaviors. Additionally, current statewide efforts include preventing underage drinking; preventing prescription drug misuse and access; prescriber training; preventing the onset or progression of alcohol, vaping and cannabis use. In light of the pandemic, COVID 19 Supplemental funds were awarded to nineteen (19) primary prevention providers and coalitions serving 28 counties in NC. The overall purpose of the grant is the prevention of substance misuse and its harmful effects on children and families caused or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic particularly with a social determinants of health (SDOH) context for disproportionately impacted individuals and communities.

The aforementioned is a high-level view of the work being conducted within primary prevention across NC. Overall, prevention providers and coalitions serve as vital partners in tackling the addiction issue from an upstream perspective. While prevention providers are serving to create, enhance and maintain healthy and safe communities for children and adults; those same healthy and safe communities support the recovery process for persons in treatment and recovery programs. In closing, a comprehensive approach to addressing substance use and its impacts requires the engagement of diverse partners including youth and persons with lived experience; multifaceted interventions that are evidence-informed yet innovative to meet the unique needs of communities; and sound public policies.