

Hooked on Huffing: This is What an Addiction to Dust-Off Looks Like

By Justin Kloczko
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It took a cheap, \$4 can of Dust-Off to derail the life of Stafford's Richard Wohllebe.

Wohllebe didn't wake up one morning and decide he wanted to get horribly addicted to an electronics cleaner; he was simply cleaning his home one day and came across a can of Dust-Off, got a whiff, and was hooked for the next year and a half of his life.

The product, which sells in stores for around a few bucks, contributed to Wohllebe being the subject of a series of arrests, car accidents, stints in jail, and being ostracized from his family. It also resulted in him having to appear 17 times in Enfield Superior Court over the last year.

"It caused me time in jail. It caused me loss of family members I have to work to get back," said Wohllebe, 54, a father of three and recovering alcoholic for six years.

Due to his troubles, he said that when his son graduated from high school in Bristol in June, he didn't want him at the ceremony.

Wohllebe has been no stranger to the court system. He's been arrested multiple times on charges such as driving while intoxicated, reckless driving, and possession of this particular inhalant, which had become his drug of choice given its cheap price and availability.

One time, Enfield police, said Wohllebe was "huffing" a canister of Dust-Off when he crashed into a Volkswagen dealership. "Huffing" is the slang term for inhaling propellants from aerosol products. This behavior had become the norm for Wohllebe.

"Mr. Wohllebe is a frequent guest of the court," Senior Assistant State's Attorney Debra Collins told Judge Michael Dannehy during one of Wohllebe's appearances in Enfield court.

During the past year Wohllebe had reckless driving charges on his record and had been pulled over for DUI multiple times in Enfield -- some just days apart from each other.

In July 2012 Wohllebe was found with two cans of Dust-Off and was charged by Enfield police

with operating a vehicle under the influence and possession of a restricted substance.

It was only four days later when Wohllebe got behind the wheel of his car, crashing it into the Volkswagen dealership in Enfield. Police found him slumped over the steering wheel, with two cans of Dust-Off next to him, police said.

Visibly sweating and slow to react to questioning from police -- symptoms common when abusing such inhalants -- he admitted to an officer that he had just bought the Dust-off, a police report said.

For most drugs, successful treatment is possible with time and focus, but the problem with inhalants such as Dust-Off is there is no effective treatment for this kind of addiction, some state experts say.

"There's no program designed for this?" Dannehy asked during one of Wohllebe's court appearances.

At one point Wohllebe received a medical and mental health referral from the court, checked into Alcohol Drug & Recovery Centers in Hartford for 17 days, and got arrested soon after getting out.

His public defender, Sandra A. Davis, later told the judge that Wohllebe's more than two weeks at the recovery center was "not enough for this type of addiction."

"The defendant continues to be arrested for continuing drug use in public," an officer wrote in one of Wohllebe's arrest reports.

Wohllebe's most recent arrest in April was because he was found huffing on a public street in Enfield. He's been charged with three DUIs in Enfield alone.

Last April, Dannehy raised Wohllebe's bond on each of his six pending cases by \$5,000 for a total of \$30,000.

"In all likelihood he is going to offend again," Dannehy said. Wohllebe later made bail.

The problem continues to be that there isn't any proper treatment for the type of addiction Wohllebe has, Davis said.

"It's pretty rare that we're treating people for that," said Jim Siemianowski of the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

Use of "inhalants is an addiction just like any other addiction, so it takes sometimes multiple times in treatment until people recover," said Mary Kate Mason, spokeswoman for the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

Only 39 people were admitted into a department funded or operated facility with inhalants as

their primary substance of choice last year, Mason said,

"I'm not saying it is not a problem. It doesn't mean people are not using inhalants and another substance," Mason said.

Another problem is that inhalants are cheap and readily available, she said. The effects of inhalants can include brain damage, other physical problems, and death, Mason said.

"But recovery is possible. There are many people living in recovery from other types of addiction," Mason said.

Susan Wolfe, quality manager at the state Department of Public Health, said use of inhalants is different from other forms of addiction.

"Inhalants are a challenge because they have a rapid intoxication rate," she said. "People will sometimes alter their story to get into treatment.

Wohllebe calls it "a disease."

"I don't think the demand is there so they don't know how to treat it. I'm not making excuses. It's my own (expletive) fault," he said while clutching a pack of hand-rolled cigarettes standing in a hallway at Enfield court.

He had the cigarettes with him with the expectation he would be getting jail time, but on this day he avoided it.

After pleading guilty to driving under the influence the judge gave him two years of probation, 100 hours of community service, and ordered him to submit to random urinalysis. All of the other charges against him were dropped in the plea agreement.

Asked why Wohllebe received no additional jail time or further treatment, being that he has been a chronic offender, Davis said the jail time he already served and the probationary period was enough of a penalty, from the judge's perspective.

"Sometimes the probation is what is needed to keep someone out of trouble," Davis said.

And Wohllebe had his own take on what's needed when it comes to an addiction to inhalants. "They should take this (expletive) off the shelves," he said.
