

- HOME
- ABOUT GOVERNOR HASSAN
- ABOUT TOM HASSAN
- MEDIA CENTER
- JUST FOR KIDS
- CONTACT GOVERNOR HASSAN



Press Release

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Governor Hassan Names James Vara Governor's Advisor on Addiction and Behavioral Health

CONCORD – As part of her efforts to combat the heroin and opioid crisis and help save lives, Governor Maggie Hassan today announced that she has named James Vara of New London as the Governor's Advisor on Addiction and Behavioral Health.

"Substance misuse, particularly the heroin and opioid crisis, is devastating families, communities and businesses across the state, and we all must work together every single day on a comprehensive approach to combat this crisis and help save lives," Governor Hassan said. "The Governor's Advisor on Addiction and Behavioral Health is an important part of those efforts, and I am proud to announce that I have named James Vara to fill the position."

"As the head of the Drug Prosecution Unit at the Department of Justice, James has led the State's prosecution efforts in drug cases, represented the Attorney General on the Drug Task Force, co-chaired the Opioid Task Force and helped develop the bipartisan legislation that I signed earlier this year to crack down on fentanyl," Governor Hassan said. "He is well respected across the state by substance misuse and behavioral health advocates and the law enforcement community, and I thank him for his commitment to taking on this incredibly important responsibility."

Currently a Senior Assistant Attorney General at the Department of Justice, Vara has led the Drug Prosecution Unit in the Criminal Justice Bureau since January 2013. His primary caseloads include felony drug prosecution and drug-related death cases, and he serves on the New Hampshire Drug Task Force, as well co-chairs the Opioid Task Force. Vara was previously assigned to homicide and general prosecution, and he has worked as Assistant County Attorney in the Grafton County Attorney's Office. He received his undergraduate degree from Montclair State University and his law degree from Rutgers University School of Law.

"As the head of the Drug Prosecution Unit, I have seen firsthand the devastating impact that this crisis is having on people across the state," Vara said. "We know that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem, and I thank Governor Hassan for entrusting me with this important responsibility. I look forward to working with the law enforcement community, substance misuse and behavioral health advocates, elected officials, state agencies, local and federal government, people in recovery and families touched by addiction to build on the Governor's efforts to stem and reverse the tide of this epidemic and help save lives."

Previously funded for the first year by a grant from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, the position is now funded by funds from the Governor's Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention, Treatment and Recovery. A memorandum of understanding between the Department of Health and Human Services and the Governor's Office for the position's funds will be brought forward at the April 6 Governor and Council meeting. Vara is expected to fully assume the position within three weeks following the transition of his current caseloads at the Department of Justice.

The Governor's Advisor on Addiction and Behavioral Health, which was formerly called the Senior Director for Substance Misuse and Behavioral Health for the Governor's Office, works directly with the Governor's Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery, and responsibilities include, but are not limited to: coordinating state resources; working with state agencies to ensure quality delivery of services; identifying barriers to and gaps in New Hampshire's system of care; recommending strategies to address those barriers and gaps; and coordinating the state's comprehensive approach to support law enforcement and strengthen prevention, treatment and recovery efforts.

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