

# A promise fulfilled: mother launches 'overdose awareness' license plate after son's death

Cheryl Juaire hopes the specialty plate will combat stigma and honor those who have died from drug overdoses

By **Chris Serres** Globe Staff, Updated January 2, 2025, 1 hour ago



Cheryl Juaire has framed photographs of her sons Sean Merrill and Corey Merrill, both overdose victims, with the license plate she has made for overdose awareness. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

When her son Sean was battling opioid addiction in early 2021, Cheryl Juaire made him a solemn promise: One day, she would create a special license plate designed to raise

greater awareness of the devastating impact of an epidemic of drug overdoses, which has claimed more than 20,000 lives in Massachusetts in the past decade.

“He said, ‘Mom, the only thing I want for my birthday are those [license] plates,’ ” Juaire said. “I promised not to let him down.”

Four months later, just after his 43rd birthday, Sean was found dead in a friend’s home in Cape Cod, her second son to die of an overdose. A toxicology report showed he had taken cocaine laced with [fentanyl](#), a powerful synthetic opioid that is lethal even in tiny amounts.

Yet Juaire never forgot the promise she made to her son.

Over the next four years, the Marlborough mother turned her grief into activism, seizing every opportunity to recruit supporters for a new specialty license plate, emblazoned with the words “Overdose Awareness” beneath the letters and numbers, alongside the symbol “OA” and the purple logo of a group that helps grief-stricken families of overdose victims.

Now, Juaire’s vision is on the verge of becoming reality. Before Christmas, she and her group reached 762 preorders for the plate, exceeding the 750 that the state Registry of Motor Vehicles requires to begin production of a specialty plate. The \$40 plates should start appearing this year. Proceeds will go to Juaire’s growing nonprofit, [Team Sharing Inc.](#), which provides grief services and advocacy for people who have lost loved ones to substance use.

Juaire and other volunteers with Team Sharing envision the plate as a catalyst for conversations about the traumatic impact of overdose deaths on families and communities, as well as strategies to prevent substance abuse and support grieving families.

“What we imagine is pulling up to that red light, and the car in front has the license plate saying ‘overdose awareness,’ and that would fill my heart because I know that person in that car gets it and supports ending stigma,” said Kathleen Scarpone, who lost her son, Joey Scarpone, a Marine sergeant, to a heroin overdose on June 13, 2015. “Maybe that would start a conversation that would save a person’s life.”

The initiative comes as Massachusetts ramps up efforts to combat the deadly opioid epidemic. In mid-December, state lawmakers reached a deal on [an expansive opioid bill](#) that would mandate insurance coverage for overdose-reversal medications such as Narcan as well as recovery-coaching services. The legislation, [signed by Governor Maura Healey just before Christmas](#), would also remove the requirement to report suspected neglect to child protection officials solely because a child was born exposed to drugs — a practice [long identified as a barrier](#) to mothers seeking treatment for addiction.

The number of people who died in Massachusetts from opioid-related overdoses [fell by 10 percent in 2023](#), the largest decrease in the state in more than a decade. Yet the total number of deaths for the year, 2,125, was still the third highest since 2001, and recent progress has not been uniform across racial and ethnic groups. The rate of fatal overdoses among non-Hispanic Black individuals and Asian/Pacific Islanders [continued to rise](#) in 2023, [according to data](#) from the state Department of Public Health.

“This [license plate] program is an important step forward in acknowledging the profound impact of the opioid epidemic,” Healey said in a statement last week. “By honoring those we’ve lost and supporting families through their grief, we are creating a space where people can share their stories, reduce stigma and inspire change.”

Yet getting approval for the plate would prove a more formidable task than organizers anticipated.

There are more than 200,000 vehicles on Massachusetts roads with specialty plates promoting [a wide range of causes](#), from curing cancer to youth hockey to preserving

white sharks. There is [even a license plate](#) that supports the Amazing World of Dr. Seuss Museum in Springfield.

To presell 750 of their specialty plates, Juairé and her fellow volunteers fanned out to community events across the state with clipboards and replicas of the new plate. They approached people at dozens of overdose vigils, recovery rallies, and addiction conferences from Revere to Belchertown in Western Massachusetts, urging them to preorder the plates. It was a painstaking process: In a good month, they got 100 applications. In others, they struggled to get one or two.

After three years, Juairé said, she was ready to toss in the towel. Then her nonprofit received a grant that helped cover the \$40 fee that people normally have to pay to preorder the plate (\$28 to \$34 of the fee goes to the sponsoring organization and the rest covers the cost of manufacturing the plate). Suddenly, Juairé said, “the floodgates opened” and applications began pouring in. “I believe it was God’s timing,” she said. “When God opens doors, he really opens doors.”

Juairé said she was also inspired by the experience of an overdose survivor and a drug policy expert named Stephen Murray, [who made headlines](#) in 2023 when he began driving around with a vanity plate saying “NARCAN.”

Murray, who oversees the SafeSpot [overdose prevention hot line](#) at Boston Medical Center, experienced the attention-grabbing power of license plates firsthand. Almost daily, strangers would pull up to his Audi and take a photo of his plate, or stop him in a parking lot and ask him questions about what it meant. One morning, he said, a man walked into his fitness gym in Plymouth and asked, “Hey, who’s got the Narcan license plate?” The question spurred a lengthy conversation among the gym-goers about the life-saving benefits of Narcan and the importance of [harm-reduction strategies](#).

An overdose survivor, Murray said he has given impromptu trainings on how to administer Narcan in supermarket parking lots and elsewhere to strangers who have asked him about the vanity plate.

“I’ve seen the impact that one [license] plate can have,” Murray said. “Just imagine hundreds or thousands of these plates out there. We can start having conversations about overdose awareness in parking lots all over New England.”

When asked how many of the overdose awareness plates she hopes to see one day, Juairé responded with a smile and a question. “How many people live in Massachusetts? I want to see one on every car.”

*For more information on the special plates, contact Juairé at [cheryl@teamsharinginc.org](mailto:cheryl@teamsharinginc.org). Plates can be [ordered online](#) directly from the Registry of Motor Vehicles once they become available.*

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