

State of opioid epidemic in Ashland Co.

By DENNIS DYER Special to the T-G Published: June 14, 2017 4:00 AM

What is the state of affairs regarding the opiate epidemic? Unfortunately, in 2016, there were nine accidental drug overdose deaths as reported by the Ashland County Office of the Coroner. The information from the coroner's office indicates that 85 percent of those who died had opioids in their systems. Opioids include a number of opioid-based drugs as well as fentanyl and carfentanil. In most cases, there also were other drugs in the systems but it appears that opioids are the key element in the overdoses.

The nine deaths in 2016 was an increase of four over five deaths in 2015. Our condolences go out to those who have lost loved ones.

Recent reporting done by The New York Times indicates that nationwide the number of overdose deaths has continued to rise. Official numbers have not been generated to date but The New York Times projects overdoses nationwide may reach 59,000 to 65,000 by the end of 2017. Montgomery County (Dayton) is experiencing a surging overdose death rate that may reach 800 in 2017. The year before was reported to have been around 375. Other urban counties are projected (based on current known death in 2017) to increase more in the range of 19 to 36 percent for 2017.

A.C.C.A.D.A. continues to see high numbers of Ashland residents present with Opioid Use Disorder. In the past year, 172 people received outpatient treatment with another 39 treated who were using opioids as their secondary drug. Combined this was 43 percent of all clients getting services at A.C.C.A.D.A. This is similar to the last few years.

The Ashland community seems to be increasingly aware of the opioid problem. In the last two years, with support from the Mental Health and Recovery Board, A.C.C.A.D.A. has placed the "Heroin Hurts" billboards in the county. A number of related articles have been published by A.C.C.A.D.A. The Times-Gazette has written a number of articles and printed others from other newspapers and news services. Others such as law enforcement and court authorities have spoken out about this problem. Several doctors locally have advocated a more cautious approach to prescribing the potentially addictive opioid-based drugs. It appears the community awareness of this problem is high. When I am in the community and the issue is mentioned, individuals express an awareness and concern about the opioid problem.

Ashland County Prosecutor Chris Tunnell has tried to address this problem through prosecution but early on recognized the importance of prevention and treatment efforts that parallel enforcement efforts. To his credit, early on in his tenure as prosecutor, he made a visit to A.C.C.A.D.A. to find out what is available as far as treatment. He has continued to advocate for related prevention and educational efforts. When I sought his input for this article he noted that "arrests are about the same but not because things are getting better." He is seeing that the law providing immunity for overdoses has reduced arrests. He also is seeing that arrests are shifting to methamphetamine. There are indications that in some cases dealers are mixing cocaine with heroin. While at this point he has not seen laboratory evidence of this, he is of course concerned about this trend. He also notes increases in children in custody or Children Services related to parents with drug problems.

A.C.C.A.D.A. counselors have seen some situations in which clients have switched from heroin to methamphetamine. This may be in part because the heroin habit became unsupportable due to tolerance developing and making the heroin use unaffordable. The methamphetamine is cheaper and lasts longer.

Another disturbing trend is that carfentanil and fentanyl are showing up in drug overdose victims. Most users know that these drugs are being mixed into the heroin to boost strength. Since these drugs are so powerful, it increases the risk of overdosing.

It appears that the opioid epidemic is continuing and that the use of fentanyl is causing an increase in nonfatal overdoses and overdose deaths.

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