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As overdoses surge, agencies joining forces to help heroin, opioid addicts

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Use of heroin has spiked in Wilson County, across North Carolina and the nation.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DREW C. WILSON | TIMES

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In the last six weeks, officials have seen an upswing in heroin and opioid overdoses. They've also had two deaths believed to be a direct result. And the trend has been alarming.

On average, Wilson County Emergency Medical Services personnel administers naloxone - a life-saving antidote which reverses an opioid overdose, about 30 times per quarter. But the past six weeks has been different.

Medics have administered the antidote on 28 patients, reversing a suspected opiate overdose in 12 uses, said Chris Parker, EMS clinical affairs officer.

"That puts us on pace for twice what we have been on average," Parker said. "There is a definite increase in opiate use in Wilson County."

Naloxone is only effective on those in an opioid situation, but it does not harm those experiencing a different type of overdose. The increase in overdoses here in a such a short amount of time prompted Wilson police to warn the community of the drugs' danger last week.

Police say they are currently investigating the two heroin/opioid-related overdose deaths. There have been no deaths reported in the county as a result of overdoses.

Across the state, there were 500 opioid diagnoses in overdose emergency department visits in July, compared to 410 during that time last year, according to state figures. Also statewide, there were 327 heroin diagnoses in overdose emergency department visits last month, compared to 232 during July 2016.

Officials say during Wilson's six-week span, the overdose patients range widely in ages, including one as young as 13 suspected of a heroin/opioid overdose.

Police officers and sheriff's deputies are armed with naloxone kits thanks to a grant funded by the Healthcare Foundation of Wilson. Parker said he and EMS staff spent Tuesday morning training more law enforcement on how to administer the antidote.

While EMS is equipped with naloxone and its medics are usually first on the scene, arming law enforcement provides an extra level of protection. Officials have said law enforcement has administered naloxone in the past several weeks, too.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO CALL

Parker said he also believes that there are more overdoses occurring than first responders know about due to naloxone's availability.

"There are more overdoses that are happening that are being reversed by family and friends," he said.

But drug users aren't calling 911. He said even if you have a naloxone kit at home and administer it, officials still want you to call 911.

"There is always a chance it can wear off," he said about the reversal antidote. "If they call us, nobody is getting in trouble. No one is showing up there to arrest somebody. We want to help the people who are addicted to these drugs."

Parker said EMS, law enforcement and others continue to band together during calls where they know people who are addicted to the powerful drug desperately need help.

And together, they've been able to provide resources.

"Between us, law enforcement and the community as a whole, we want to try and help these people get help," Parker said. He said while EMS' duty is to make sure people are OK medically, the agency has also partnered with others in the community to ensure they can provide an avenue for patients to get the help they desperately need.

"The community is really coming together to find alternative ways to help people," he said. "It takes all of us."

Officials continue to spread the word regarding North Carolina's Good Samaritan law, which provides criminal and civil immunity to bystanders who call for emergency help and attempt to render aid during an overdose. Law enforcement officials say they don't want people to be afraid to reach out or have fear of being prosecuted when there is a life-and-death situation.

INITIATIVES UNDERWAY IN WILSON

There are several initiatives multiple agencies are working on to combat the problem in Wilson. From law enforcement to health agencies, as well as the Wilson County Substance Prevention Coalition, a united front has emerged.

Programs include the Wilson Police Department's Hope Alliance program, which is modeled after the Nashville Police Department's Hope Initiative. The program here will be a safe way for opioid and heroin addicts to get help without fear of being arrested or prosecuted as well as connecting those individuals to vital community resources.

Hope Alliance has many partners including the Wilson County Substance Prevention Coalition, Wilson Medical Center's behavioral health department and Eastpointe. The goal is to reduce the barriers to substance abuse disorder treatment. A person who is ready to enter into detox or residential treatment will have an opportunity to seek help through the Wilson Police Department and its partners.

Many other programs are underway, too, including a syringe exchange program which will be headed up by the Wilson County Health Department along with partner agencies.

The Wilson County Substance Prevention Coalition also received more than \$150,000 in grant money from the Healthcare Foundation of Wilson last week to support a Community Recovery Resource Center for Wilson residents who suffer from substance abuse disorders. The center's role will include helping young adults address substance abuse, maintain their recovery and increase employment.

Mike and Becky Cannon, who founded the JCANS Foundation after their son, Jonathan, died as a result of a heroin overdose in 2015, are also a part of the growing number of people who are reaching out to those suffering from addiction. They too will be a part of the many initiatives in Wilson.

The Cannons, along with law enforcement and other community leaders, recently completed Recovery Coach Academy training, which was led by Recovery Communities of North Carolina. The 30-hour training, held at Barton College, was sponsored by the Wilson County Substance Prevention Coalition and Eastpointe. Recovery coaches help others initiate and sustain addiction recovery within the community.

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