

The Opioid crisis has hit the suburban Atlanta counties of Fulton, Cobb & DeKalb as hard as anywhere in the country.

In 2016, 72.3 percent of all drug-related fatalities in Cobb County were caused by opioids, up from 64.8 percent just one year before. And in 2015, the Cobb County Narcotics team seized more heroin than in the previous 20 years -- combined.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Fulton County, the Medical Examiner's Office recorded a total of 77 heroin deaths in 2014, compared to just four in 2010.

Behind these statistics are hurting families -- families that are being torn apart by addiction, facing financial ruin in their effort to try anything to make things right, or worse, losing a loved one to overdose or suicide.

Our community's -- our nation's -- opioid crisis is a complex issue, and it's not going to be solved with any single proposal. Admitting there is a problem is the first step, however.

This is an uncomfortable, sensitive issue, particularly in communities that have long felt immune to fatal substance abuse problems. Still, communities -- through churches, law enforcement, non profits -- are coming together to take action.

This year, the North Fulton city of Alpharetta created a new program designed to reduce painkiller abuse across the county. With the help of Alpharetta's Rotary Club, the city purchased boxes that will collect unused and unwanted prescription medications at its police headquarters and fire stations.

The boxes cost about \$1,000 each and are designed and constructed to prevent anyone from stealing the drugs inside.

It may seem a small measure, but it is making an impact by providing a safe, secure disposal point.

In the city of Johns Creek, the Hub Community Resource Center acts as a lifeline for those seeking drug abuse and mental illness attention. Centers like these help people suffering from addiction and prevent others from succumbing to the same fate in the future.

Ultimately, the incarceration of addicts should not be seen as some kind of victory or solution. Instead, we must look at the root causes, most effective potential solutions, and – most importantly – we must work towards finding ways for those affected by opioid addiction to recover to lead healthy, productive lives.

As Cobb County District Attorney Vic Reynolds said, “We cannot arrest our way out of this epidemic....The road to recovery must be lined with treatment options.”

Further, Non-opioid and non-pharmacological treatments or therapies for pain do exist. Studies show that these alternative therapies can be just as beneficial or better than prescription pain medications, but without the side effects of overuse and abuse.

Atlanta’s Emory University recognized Pain Awareness Month in September by educating the community about pain relief alternatives to prescription medications.

As the opioid epidemic spreads, we need data and alternatives to medications now more than ever.

Finally, I want to specifically commend two legislators in my home state of Georgia – State Senator Renee Untermann and State Representative Sharon Cooper – each of whom have been leading the efforts on opioid addiction prevention from the state capitol. Senator Unterman is the Chairman of the Committee on Health and Human Services and sponsor of SB81, legislation focused on Naloxone availability and electronic reporting of controlled substances in Georgia.

We can do better than this crisis we're facing across the country, and creative options like those we're seeing throughout the Sixth District of Georgia are all part of the national effort. Our local, state and federal law enforcement, healthcare groups, drug enforcement agencies and elected leaders must continue to work together. The lives of tens of thousands of Americans are literally depending on it.