

## Turning the corner on fatal overdoses?

By **Shane Hoover**

CantonRep.com staff writer

Posted Dec 10, 2017 at 1:00 PM

After watching the number of opioid overdose deaths rise for three straight years, Stark County could see that number drop in 2017.

**CANTON** After watching the number of opioid overdose deaths rise for three straight years, Stark County could see that number drop in 2017.

The Coroner's Office had 64 confirmed opioid overdoses through Oct. 9, 11 fewer deaths than on the same date last year, according to an analyses by the Canton Police Department.

The results are encouraging, but those who are fighting locally against an overdose epidemic that killed 4,050 Ohioans last year caution there is still more work to do.

"Anybody who loses their life to opiates is too many," said John R. Aller, executive director of Stark County Mental Health and Addiction Recovery.

### Drop in Canton

Canton is Stark's largest city and traditionally has had the most opioid overdose deaths, but this year it accounts for a smaller share of those deaths in the county.

As of Oct. 9, the city had 20 fatal opioid overdoses — 31 percent of the county's death toll — down from 34 deaths — or 45 percent of the total — at the same time last year.

More recent figures aren't available because it takes the Coroner's Office several weeks to confirm an overdose death with toxicology tests.

During the first part of this year police weren't seeing a drop in overdose-related incidents, but fewer people were dying because emergency services had gotten better at saving lives, said Lt. John Gabbard, commander of the Canton Police Department's Priorities Bureau.

The number of overdose-related incidents started to drop in June, and through November Canton Police had 365 overdose-related reports, down from 443 as of November last year.

"Which tells me we may be turning the corner on this," Gabbard said.

The Stark County Health Department tracks overdose visits to local urgent care and emergency departments and its numbers show a similar trend. The rate of overdose visits rose above 21 per 100,000 in June 2016, peaked at 30 per 100,000 in August of that year, then dropped below 21 per 100,000 in May, where it remained as of October.

### What's going on?

Aller commended Canton Police for analyzing the hard data. He also cautioned that trends will ebb and flow.

For example, opioid deaths dipped from 42 in 2012 to 36 in 2013, only to rise the next three years, according to the latest Canton Police analysis.

But Aller and Gabbard noted the community-wide effort by law enforcement, treatment providers, health departments, hospitals, schools, the Stark County Opiate Task Force and other groups to tackle opioid addiction.

There also are external factors. For example, doctors in Ohio are prescribing fewer opioid painkillers and the worst part of the epidemic seems to have shifted to southwestern Ohio, said Keith Hochadel, president and chief executive of CommQuest Services, a major treatment provider.

Also, CommQuest clients are reporting the area now has less carfentanyl and fentanyl, two potent opioids, Hochadel said. But that could change, with deadly consequences.

"I think we need to stay on top of this and be vigilant to make sure, over the next 12 months to two years, we continue to see a decline or what that trend is," Hochadel said.

### **Canton program**

One of the initiatives – but not the only one — that has played a part in Canton is the Stark Outreach Support Team, Gabbard said.

Canton Police started the SOS Team in June. Borrowing a model used in other Ohio communities, the SOS Team comprises a police officer, a nurse and a social worker and visits overdose survivors with the goal of steering them into treatment.

From June 14 to Nov. 15, the team had engaged 56 people, made 52 treatment referrals and distributed 18 naloxone kits out of 130 attempted visits, according to Canton Police statistics. Naloxone, also called Narcan, reverses an opioid overdose.

The Stark County Sheriff's Office last month started a countywide Quick Response Team that is similar to Canton's SOS Team. Both teams include staff from Crisis Intervention and Recovery Center and Stark County TASC.

Gabbard said the teams would be able to build a database and coordinate their efforts.

Collecting data on overdoses not just in Canton but around the county will allow Stark MHAR, law enforcement and treatment providers to respond to trends in specific communities, said Michele Boone, Stark MHAR's clinical director.

Looking ahead, Aller said, the community needs to keep working to better connect addicted individuals with treatment. It also needs to support the police, treatment workers, nurses, doctor and medics who are prone to compassion fatigue as they deal daily with the life-and-death consequences of addiction, Aller said. "It's really those folks who are seeing this first hand."

Reach Shane at 330-580-8338 or \_\_\_\_\_

On Twitter: \_\_\_\_\_



**SIGN UP FOR DAILY E-MAIL**

Wake up to the day's top news, delivered to your inbox

---