
Opinion

Stark County judge: Progress, but more to do, in addressing opioid epidemic

By Judge Frank Forchione / Special to The Canton Repository

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In 2015, the Repository offered me the opportunity to discuss “Where we stand today in the fight against heroin.” Two years later, we addressed this issue again in an editorial titled, “Facing the Truth about Heroin.” Today, the opioid epidemic continues to ravage our community, destroying the lives of loved ones across all sectors of society. Ohio is second in the country in overdose deaths; we are in the midst of what is considered the nation’s worst public health crisis to date.

Fatal drug overdoses continued rising in Ohio to a record 4,854 last year, a 20 percent increase. It marked the eighth year in a row that drug deaths have gone up. Powerful and deadly fentanyl is to blame for Ohio’s surging drug crisis; the synthetic opioid contributed to nearly three-fourths of the deaths, killing 3,431 in 2017, up 40 percent from the previous year. It is now our deadliest foe.

However, the statistics point out that our efforts are not in vain. Deaths from heroin alone dropped 46 percent last year, from 1,444 in 2016 to 987, the lowest in four years. Fewer Ohioans are dying from prescriptive opioids, often the gateway to heroin and fentanyl use. Fatal overdoses from prescription opioids fell to 523 in 2017, the lowest level in eight years and down from a peak of 724 deaths in 2011. Preliminary data for 2018 hints that unintentional overdose deaths might have decreased in 2018.

In another positive sign, overdose deaths in Stark County are down for the second year in a row. The Stark County Coroner’s Office ruled 51 deaths as accidental overdoses through October, 2018. The county had 69 overdose deaths by that time the year before. That downward trend followed a 27 percent decrease in overdose deaths in 2017, a year in which Stark County had the lowest fatal overdose rate among Ohio’s most populous counties. These statistics

demonstrate that the Stark County community recognized the tidal wave approaching early and joined together available resources to address the impact. Leadership through many groups has successfully provided public awareness to the cause, including but not limited to the Stop Heroin From Killing Committee, Stark County Mental Health and Addiction Recovery, CommQuest and Families Against the Heroin Epidemic Rally in Stark (F.A.T.H.E.R.S.)

For all the success we are seeing in dealing with the opioid problem, however, methamphetamines have re-emerged more popular than ever. Drug cartels have been pumping the state full of meth as a safer, cheaper alternative to heroin, evidenced by a 126 percent increase in meth-related overdose deaths in 2017. Meth is a highly addictive stimulant that attacks the nervous system. The high that meth causes can be deadly because it makes people hallucinate and behave recklessly. Those looking for a stronger high might mix meth with more potent drugs, like fentanyl and carfentanyl, a combination that can kill them in seconds.

It is obvious Stark County is doing the right things. First, judges and treatment providers are making the saving of lives a priority, especially through their drug courts. Law enforcement has assisted by making sure Narcan — a drug that reverses an opioid overdose — is on hand and distributed throughout the community. They are also using innovative techniques to battle drug cartels.

CommQuest, Stark County MHAR and other agencies are providing a range of treatment recovery options, replacing a one-size-fits-all approach. We are even having discussions about the dangers in our public schools. Our work is not done, however. The losses our families are suffering are heartbreaking, and it has got to stop. Coroner's offices are full, and emergency rooms are filled to the brim with victims of opioid overdoses.

Stark County government agencies have joined forces with other Ohio communities and have sued the biggest pharmaceutical drug makers, holding them accountable for the current crisis gripping the nation. A federal judge has held this massive lawsuit can go forward and has scheduled trial for September. This much-applauded ruling allows claims for racketeering, fraud, conspiracy and negligence. Any funds recovered could be distributed to the communities so they can determine the best way to address the epidemic.

Finally, Issue 1 proponents should be commended for recognizing that more treatment is necessary, and the “lock up and throw away the key” philosophy does not work. We cannot arrest our way out of this national health crisis. It is obvious the legislature needs to step forward to pass legislation aimed at treatment and transitional housing to give addicts a chance to become productive in our community. If you get a chance, contact them and express your thoughts.

The Stop Heroin From Killing Committee will be hosting its fifth Opioid Symposium, which is free to the public, from 6 to 8:30 p.m. Feb. 28 in the Johnson Center on the campus of Malone University. It is sponsored by Aultcare and the Schroer Group. Several speakers will address options for treatment and tips for overcoming addiction.

Our theme: “15 Minutes Can Save a Life.” Please take 15 minutes of your own time to speak to a family member, friend or co-worker about the dangers of opioids. If we save one life, our efforts will be worth it!

Frank Forchione is a judge on the Court of Common Pleas in Stark County.