

Stark County's overdose death toll rises

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Posted May 12, 2020 at 9:53 AM

CANTON More people died from accidental drug overdoses in Stark County last year than in the two previous years, according to the Coroner's Office.

The 103 deaths reported in 2019 marked a 37% increase over the 75 deaths in 2018.

Local treatment providers note a rise in cocaine and methamphetamine use, while the community continues to grapple with fentanyl, heroin and other opioids.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus pandemic, which has increased social isolation for everyone, has raised the threat that even more county residents will die from overdoses this year.

Mix of drugs

Coroner Anthony Bertin didn't pinpoint a reason for the rise in overdose deaths last year, but said there were more cases where a person died after taking a mix of drugs.

According to a Canton Repository analysis of the 103 overdose deaths:

- 76 people ingested one or more opioids prior to death, most often a fentanyl-related substance.
- 65 people ingested one or more stimulants prior to death, including cocaine or methamphetamine.
- 47 people ingested both an opioid and a stimulant prior to death.
- Roughly one in six deaths involved a single substance, most often cocaine or alcohol.

Sometimes drug dealers mix fentanyl — a powerful opioid — with heroin, cocaine or methamphetamine and sell it to unwitting buyers. In other cases, fentanyl is pressed into counterfeit prescription pills.

“Without any doubt, fentanyl is in cocaine and meth,” said Cindy Koumoutzis, executive director of OhioCAN (Change Addiction Now) and a volunteer at Canton’s syringe exchange program. “That’s a given. We know that. The problem is that the people consuming it don’t know that.”

Opioids and stimulants

John Aller, executive director of Stark County Mental Health and Addiction Recovery, said an increase in stimulant use is concerning.

“I think we’re going to continue to see a leveling off or reduction of heroin or fentanyl overdose deaths, but I think we’re going to see an increase in cocaine and methamphetamine and alcohol deaths,” Aller said.

Stimulants present a challenge because there isn’t a medication that can reduce cravings, and naloxone won’t reverse an overdose of stimulants or alcohol.

Aller said StarkMHAR has been working with Ohio’s congressional delegation to free up federal money to treat individuals addicted to methamphetamine, cocaine and alcohol, but the amount of money the county will get remains to be seen.

“We just have to stay diligent and make sure we’re focusing needed attention on those other areas,” he said.

Another factor could be that opioids hold individuals in a deadly cycle of tolerance and withdrawal, said Keith Hochadel, president and CEO of CommQuest Services, a major treatment provider in the county.

Naloxone, an antidote to opioid overdose, is readily available. So are medications such as buprenorphine, methadone and Vivitrol. But a person has to commit to the counseling side of recovery, and treatment providers have to be patient with their clients, he said.

“I worry sometimes people are looking for that quick fix, looking for that pill or that magic

strip that will make it go away, but recovery's difficult," Hochadel said.

Looking ahead

Social restraints during the coronavirus pandemic have raised the possibility that even more men and women will die from overdoses this year.

"Isolation is their No. 1 trigger," Koumoutzis said. "They get into their head too much."

She encouraged individuals to get naloxone for loved ones who are at risk for an overdose.

Stark County hasn't seen a spike in overdoses yet, but other communities have. For example, overdose deaths in Montgomery County were up a quarter through April.

"Whenever you have a pandemic, ... it's common to see an increase in overdoses and it's also common to see an increase in deaths by suicide," Aller said.

Allison Esber, StarkMHAR systems initiative manager, stressed that providers such as CommQuest, Stark County TASC and Summit Psychological Associates are still accepting clients and naloxone kits remain available through CommQuest and Coleman Crisis Center.

While CommQuest's hospital-based detox units in Canton and Alliance have been at half capacity to keep rooms at single occupancy, the plan is to return to full capacity by June 1, Hochadel said.

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