

Heroin epidemic leads to crime, ODs, deaths: Happ

By Ryan Whisner, Union regional editor | Posted: Thursday, January 2, 2014 11:05 am

Second in a series

JEFFERSON — Heroin and other similar opiates have become the drugs of choice in Jefferson County and elsewhere across the state, fueling crime, breeding unsafe living environments and hugely increasing the number of overdoses reported during the past year.

It has become an epidemic.

“It’s hurting our kids,” Jefferson County District Attorney Susan Happ said. “It’s impacting our communities, not only in terms of sense of safety, but actually keeping our property in our homes safe and secure.

“Heroin use is not only on the rise, but it leads to increased criminal activity, overdoses and deaths,” she continued. “We see far too often that people who experiment with heroin become addicted, sometimes after the first use.”

While an increase in criminal activity is troubling enough, Happ said, the greatest concern to county officials is the number of overdoses — some of which have proved fatal.

“Law enforcement gets numerous calls every month to respond when heroin users overdose after injecting or snorting heroin,” she said. “We’ve seen this happen with the user behind the wheel of a car, in a grocery store bathroom and in their home. It endangers citizens, as well as the users themselves. Sometimes we can save them. Sometimes we are just too late.”

The heroin found in Wisconsin typically comes from South or Central America, traveling through Mexico to Chicago and Milwaukee and spreading from those epicenters across the area.

“The big metropolitan areas are the suppliers to the smaller rural areas,” said Detective Sgt. Margareta Gray of the Jefferson County Drug Taskforce.

Depending on the location in Jefferson County, the heroin is from Madison, Milwaukee, Rockford and, in some rare cases, even Chicago.

Throughout 2013, Gray said, the Jefferson County Drug Task Force seized more than 5 grams of heroin, or approximately 250 doses. A total of 3.5 grams was seized in 2012, up from 2 grams in 2011.

“What we’re seeing with the drugs is kind of a rollercoaster,” she said. “You may have cocaine use on the high end and then, when you have strategies and prevention and enforcement, it comes down, but then something else comes up. It is a constant rollercoaster.”

Opiates, including heroin, might remain at the top of the track for the next three to five years before officials can get a handle on it and some other drug takes their place.

“Heroin resonates with more people as opposed to someone who has an addiction to a Percocet, Vicodin or oxycotin,” Happ said, adding that from her perspective, they all basically are interchangeable.

As district attorney, Happ has taken a very hard line approach on opiate dealers.

“If you deal in opiates, and heroin in particular, I’m going to recommend prison,” she said. “It sounds very harsh, but you are basically handing someone a loaded gun. You are now saying, ‘I’m addicted to heroin or I’m addicted to oxy and that is a personal danger to you as the user.’”

“When you start actually dealing, even if its to support your own habit, you are now endangering the people you deal to,” she noted. “Each and every time another person uses, that has lethal potential. From my perspective, those deliveries are prison cases.”

Many of the offenders have little or no criminal history.

For cases of possession of heroin, Happ said, she focuses more on the rehabilitation aspect and recommends probation. However, when the suspect is a dealer, that is no longer the case.

“That is a component, but when you risk other people’s lives because of your addiction, then my focus is on protection of the community,” the district attorney said.

What has surprised her in facing these defendants is the lack of general classification. With marijuana, cocaine and other illicit drugs, law enforcement and, to a lesser extent, the general public can identify the users.

However, with opiates, she said, that distinction no longer is clear.

“It’s 17-year-olds, it’s 60-year-olds, it’s men, it’s women from all socio-economic parts of life,” Happ said of users.

She noted that the problem with the opiates and heroin in particular is that first use. A person can become addicted to heroin after one “hit.”

“That’s why the prevention component is so important,” the district attorney said.

Heroin’s resurgence has its roots in a related problem: the abuse of prescription medications such as oxycodone and other painkillers that now are being prescribed.

“If you have an injury and pain associate with it, the drugs will help with the pain; if you are abusing it and not using it for what it is prescribed, that is where you get the high from,” Det. Sgt. Gray said.

Initially, they start chewing the pills, and then start crushing them to snort or inject the drug.

After using these drugs — often for legitimate injuries — people can find themselves addicted. When the prescription painkillers dry up, addicts seek other sources that give them that opiate high.

“They are getting their high off that and it gets expensive, so then the next thing they do is switch over to heroin,” she said, noting that pharmaceuticals are becoming more restrictive on availability.

Adding to the problem is that the price of heroin has gone way down while its purity has gone up. This puts a “rock-star high” in reach of the general public, while eliminating the unsightly need to “shoot up.”

The new, purer heroin can be ingested by snorting, although after a certain length of usage, addicts eventually switch to the needle anyway for a faster high.

Users have told Gray that when injecting, there is an immediate intense high for the first five to 10 seconds and then it reaches the point at which it starts wearing off and eventually when the user becomes very lethargic. When that wears off, the user needs another fix.

Despite regulations on the prescription medications, heroin is cheaper and easier to get.

“It is pushing them away from the opioid prescription medication and into the heroin itself,” she said.

Drug taskforce representatives purchased more than 5 grams of heroin in 2013 “stings.” Putting that number in perspective, Gray noted, the typical dose of heroin is approximately .01 to .02 grams. Those using it more will be using more than that in one dose.

In addition, Gray said that users take their heroin soon, if not immediately after, the purchase.

“As soon as they get it, they use it,” she said.

Because of that addiction and desire to maintain that high, the users feel a need to continue feeding themselves with heroin. To do that, they resort to whatever action necessary, including crime.

“We have seen a tremendous increase in thefts and burglaries by offenders who are stealing to get money to get their next heroin fix and even turning to dealing heroin to support their addiction,” Happ said.

Gray estimated that at least 60 percent of property crimes are tied to some type of drug addiction. It is difficult to tabulate, unless investigators ask whether drugs are the root cause.

Multiple high-profile crimes in 2013 were linked to heroin or other drugs.

Suspects in two recent Fort Atkinson robberies allegedly told police heroin addiction was a motivation for committing their crimes.

Logan C. Simonsen has pleaded not guilty to one count each of robbery of a financial institution, theft from a financial institution in a value exceeding \$500 but not exceeding \$10,000, and operating a motor vehicle without the owner's consent. The charges relate to the July 1 robbery of Badger Bank in Fort Atkinson.

Upon being apprehended in Illinois, Simonsen allegedly told police that he had robbed the bank because he was addicted to heroin. He reportedly had shot heroin that morning and all he could think about was obtaining more heroin.

Fewer than two weeks later, 20-year-old Skyler Smith of Janesville admitted to two robberies, one on Monday, July 8, at the Francois Gas Station in Janesville, and another Friday, July 12, at Citgo on the Point in Fort Atkinson.

Smith reportedly told police that he had a heroin problem that had "been a problem that has gone on for many years."

Recently, drug-related charges were filed in Jefferson County Circuit Court against a 26-year-old Watertown man already facing charges for burglarizing four Johnson Creek homes. Benjamin J. Bates allegedly broke into the residences Tuesday, Oct. 22, apparently looking for money in order to buy heroin.

He pleaded not guilty to one count of burglary, arming himself with a dangerous weapon, and three counts of burglary of a dwelling. Bates faces a maximum penalty of 52.5 years in prison if convicted on all charges. An unrelated count of possession of narcotic drugs and misdemeanor bailjumping also have been filed.

Two heroin-related overdose deaths in 2012 led to homicide charges in Jefferson County.

Vanessa Hummel, 21, of the Town of Hebron pleaded no contest and was sentenced to 10 years in prison for providing the heroin that caused the Aug. 18, 2012, death of 27-year-old Ian Montony of Lake Mills.

Six other individuals were convicted of various crimes associated with Montony's death, including one allegedly involved in the drug deal in which Montony obtained the heroin.

Five other individuals entered pleas of either guilty or no-contest to either a single count of failing in their duty to aid a victim of a crime or obstruction of justice. All five suspects reportedly were

aware that Montony might have taken heroin and yet they took no action to get him medical help to prevent his death or report the alleged crime.

Also, a January trial has been set for Cynthia J. Rogalski, 24, of Watertown, who is charged with providing 17-year-old Alexis Schoeffling of Jefferson with the heroin that killed her. Rogalski faces a maximum of more than 65 years in prison if convicted on both charges, to which she pleaded not guilty in April.

County law enforcement officials have indicated that there have been other opiate- or heroin-related deaths, some of which still might be under investigation in terms of potential charging opportunities.

“If I run numbers purely on possession of heroin, it is going to grossly understate the expanse of the problem,” Happ said.

As example, she cited Simonsen, who has pleaded guilty to robbing Badger Bank in Fort Atkinson.

“That’s not a heroin case, but it is because he commits a robbery of a bank because after shooting up at 5 a.m., by 9 a.m. he needs another hit,” the district attorney said.

Law enforcement is attempting to better track and document how chronic the opiate problem is.

“There are so many crimes where you are not going to find the heroin or charge a drug-related offense, but it is absolutely driven by addiction,” Happ said. “Those are just the ones we know of that get caught. There are all these people using and abusing and are not even in our system yet.”

In an attempt to prevent further tragedy, county officials from various offices have formed the Jefferson County Heroin Taskforce to educate citizens about the problem, address treatment needs and, hopefully, reduce substance abuse in Jefferson County.

“I think we all realize too that just treatment or just law enforcement can’t take care of the problem,” Happ said. “It’s got to be everybody working together.”