

## County taskforce formed to tackle 'heroin emergency'

By Lydia Statz, Daily Union staff writer | Posted: Monday, January 6, 2014 10:01 am

To most people, life in Jefferson County is defined by the small towns that dot its landscape: farming, good schools, outdoor activities and tight-knit communities.

But for the past few years, a "heroin emergency" has rocked the county, fueling crime, breeding unsafe living environments and hugely increasing the number of drug overdoses reported during the past year.

More county residents than ever before have turned to heroin, driven by the decreased availability of prescription opiates. The nation as a whole has become more aware of the toll of prescription drug abuse in recent years, leading to a reformulation of the popular opiate OxyContin, creation of prescription drug-monitoring programs and a new reluctance among doctors to write prescriptions for unnecessary opiates.

With new obstacles in place, many who had become dependent on opiate painkillers found themselves turning to the cheaper, more readily available heroin as a substitute.

The drug — extremely addicting due to its quick-acting, short-lived high — has played a hand in nearly every major crime in the area during the past year. Addicts, searching for ways to get their next fix, often steal from family or community members to finance their addiction, abuse and neglect children under their care, or can overdose with fatal consequences.

The epidemic has overwhelmed the county's various law enforcement and health services agencies to the point that they finally joined forces to do something about it.

Jefferson County District Attorney Susan Happ and Human Services Department director Kathi Cauley took the lead in forming the county's first heroin taskforce earlier this fall, including law enforcement from all local communities, county officials, health workers and representatives from the local hospitals. Local officials hope the taskforce will take a multi-level approach to stemming the problem and help to build new resources or find new, more efficient and cost-effective ways of fighting the influence of drugs.

Kathleen Eisenmann, family living agent at the University of Wisconsin-Extension in Jefferson County who acts as the group's organizer, said the taskforce has focused on the key principles of prevention, coordination and intervention.

The group has met twice this fall for workshops, and has agreed on a few key principles: the solution to Jefferson County's heroin problem will require multiple approaches ... and everybody's cooperation.

"A real key principle the group embraced was the idea of really being very focused and attentive to the idea of just gathering a limited amount of information focused on the question of 'What is the solution?' as opposed to studying the problem," said Eisenmann. " Oftentimes when groups are studying very complex issues or problems, they spend an awful long time studying data about the problem ... Focusing on the solutions are really the more proactive and effective way to design a systemic response."

A key part of that solution, said Eisenmann, will be designing community outreach programs to prevent future users from ever picking up the drug in the first place.

"That includes a certain amount of social marketing or community education or raising some awareness among community members that this is a problem and how does it manifest itself in each of your communities, and are there some strategies to prevent people from even considering drug use or drug abuse?" she said.

Cauley, whose department treats as many as 90 patients at a time with the opiate receptor-blocking drug Suboxone, said she believes much of the community education will need to focus on a more basic level.

"There are still many parents who, when you talk to them, they're astonished. 'What do you mean? We live in Jefferson County, we don't have a heroin problem!'" she said.

For several years before heroin hit Jefferson County, larger cities such as Madison and Milwaukee suffered under its influence. Now, the drug has made its way to rural counties, turning up on the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater campus, in high schools and nearly every facet of society.

"I think it's important to get the information out that it isn't like there's this little subgroup with characteristics that become heroin users," she said. "This crosses every socio-economic level, race and issue that there is."

The taskforce will be focusing on bringing speakers into the local schools, having addicts share their personal stories and spreading information signs to look for in loved ones.

Dr. Mel Haggart, the Department of Human Services' medical director, said changes in behavior such as secretiveness, a change in friends, missing work or school, or finding money missing from the house should put a family on the alert for potential substance abuse.

“Anything like that should raise your suspicion pretty high that you’re dealing with something that may just be a fluke or may just be a temporary thing, but could easily be something significant,” he said.

The second tenet of the taskforce’s “four-pillars” approach to reducing heroin’s influence on the county will be inter-agency coordination.

“We’re looking at policies within the organizations and among the organizations to make sure that policies within those areas are very congruent and complementary,” said Eisenmann.

Eisenmann said the idea came from Happ, as district attorney, and Cauley, as the director of Human Services, comparing notes and realizing that any comprehensive solution would involve working together.

“It began as a sort of general awareness of ‘Hey, it’s not just my agency that’s struggling to address this issue; it’s several different agencies that are struggling to address this issue,’” and ‘What can we do to work together to be more effective at addressing it?’” said Eisenmann.

Communication between communities will be key, as different parts of the county are seeing differing effects from the epidemic.

“One of the things the group recognizes is that how this problem manifests itself in every community across the county is going to look a little bit different,” said Eisenmann. “So developing some broad strategies that would help those communities, and the county as a whole across those communities, is really important.”

The final major factor in the county’s response will be in setting up effective treatment and intervention options.

“There’s a subcommittee working on looking at what evidence-based treatment options and what we need more information on in order to put some things in place that will help us to create and maintain those effective options,” she said.

The group will evaluate the treatment options currently offered in the county, including the outpatient Suboxone program and counseling through the Human Services Department, to see how effective they are and what types of people could benefit from different types of services.

“We do share with people that there are some abstinence communities out there through CrossPointe Church (in Jefferson) and Pastor Dean (Kurtz of Calvary Baptist Church) of Watertown, but again, most of the people who come here have not been able to stop, so we have Suboxone as an option, and we try to do the wraparound approach,” said Cauley.

Also, programs currently offered in other areas will be evaluated to find out if they could be effective in Jefferson County. At least one such option already is in the works.

“We have applied for a grant for a treatment court, because there would be some families where mom or dad has been impacted by addiction issues and instead of being incarcerated, they could remain at home, with children, in a highly, highly, intensively supervised program,” Cauley said.

In order to put these efforts into practice, the county recently applied for a national grant to implement community programs.

The Drug-Free Communities Grant is administered through the Office of National Drug Control Police, which will fund \$19.8 million in new grants to communities this year. The philosophy behind the program is to equip local organizations to provide local solutions to drug problems. Over two-dozen communities in Wisconsin currently are receiving funding through the program.

The taskforce has no set timeline in mind to accomplish its goals, as officials realize the problem is complex.

“It’s going to be an ongoing taskforce. They recognize that until they get some of these things in place that are cooking along, it may take some time,” said Eisenmann. “It’s going to take some ongoing effort and ongoing work and ongoing strategy in order to develop the strategies that are going to deal with this down the road. If it was an easy problem to solve, we would have solved it a long time ago.”

And through it all, the process will continue to evolve, evaluating which local officials should be added to the group, what’s working and what’s not, and working in tandem with national and statewide efforts, such as a heroin-prevention campaign launched by the state Department of Justice in 2013 called “The Fly Effect.”

Eisenmann said that although the taskforce focuses specifically on heroin, the programs implemented based on its research could be used in decades to come to address all addictions.

“They really wanted to focus not just on heroin, which happens to be the drug that’s the main problem right now, but also on drug abuse and use generally speaking, because they recognized that there have been years and years that, every four or five years, there was a new drug of choice,” she said.

Such efforts have been used successfully before in the county. Cauley said an education campaign in the schools helped to stifle a methamphetamine trend several years ago, and the group’s hope would be for similar results with this effort. But the solution to Jefferson County’s heroin problem will not come overnight.

“It’s a learning process, it really is,” said Eisenmann. “And it will continue to be a learning process until we really fully tackle the issue.”