

## Heroin focus of county summit

By Ryan Whisner, Union regional editor | Posted: Friday, May 2, 2014 10:01 am

Representatives of Jefferson County law enforcement, health and human services providers and educators gathered in Fort Atkinson Thursday for the first-ever Jefferson County Heroin Summit in hopes of changing the message that “our children are dying.”

That is what Jefferson County Administrator Ben Weh meier was told when he took over his position last year.

That is understandable, as the heroin epidemic is one that has not been witnessed in the experience of those featured on the panel Thursday. However, just the opposite actually is true.

Speakers at Jansen’s Banquet Hall included Jefferson County District Attorney Susan Happ; Jefferson County Drug Task Force Detective Sgt. Margareta Gray; Dr. Douglas Keene of Advanced Pain Management; Jefferson County Human Services director Kathi Cauley and mental health and addiction clinic director Holly Pagel; Melanie Crandall, a Jefferson woman whose 17-year-old daughter, Alexis L. Schoeffling, died from a heroin overdose in September 2012; Drug Awareness Resistance Education (DARE) officers Lake Mills Police Officer Troy Oestreich and Fort Atkinson Police Officer Daniel Hefty, and School District of Fort Atkinson District Administrator Dr. Jeff Zaspel.

More than 250 area residents, county supervisors, law enforcement officers, council members, school board representatives and others attended the summit. It was broadcast live on KOOL 106.5 and will be available via podcast and rebroadcast on local public access channels in the weeks to come.

“On behalf of the staff of Jefferson County, I would like to thank you for your attendance at this evening’s significant event,” Wehmeier said. “This is a continued effort to provide an education of awareness as it relates to our heroin and opiate drug epidemics that are pouring across the county.”

He said there are many reasons for those on the panel to be engaged in the issues.

“Tonight will be an example of the cost this epidemic is having on several of our major departments within the county, all being paid for by tax dollars at the local, county state and federal level,” he stated.

He said the presentations would illustrate the community impact this family of drugs is having, whether in the schools or on the streets, as well as on public safety. Lastly, he said, there would be an example of that true perspective of a personal nature of the damage heroin can do to a family.

“As you see, there is a broad range of efforts, from various government entities to the healthcare industry other not-for-profits and religious organizations that are part of the solution in this ongoing epidemic,” the county administrator said.

(Today’s Daily Union covers discussions by Cau ley, Pagel and Zaspel. Watch for stories on the law enforcement perspective in Monday’s paper.)

Statistics show that since 2010, more Jefferson County residents than ever before have turned to heroin as their drug of choice, driven by the decreased availability of prescription opiates. The increased prevalence of the drug locally follows state and nationwide trends.

“It is not only our kids that are being impacted, it is our neighbors next door, who may have become hooked by a simple injury requiring pain medication,” Wehmeier said. “Drugs in the opiate family do not discriminate based on one’s race, socio-economic status or age. It immediately grabs a hold of those impacted with indifference of who they are or where they come from. There is no stereotype for heroin users.”

The county administrator, who upon arriving here was faced with the message that children were dying, noted Thursday that the epidemic is not isolated to Jefferson County and is, in fact, an issue being felt across numerous regions of the state and country.

Recently, the Wisconsin Legislature approved a series of bills known as the HOPE (Heroin, Opiate, Prevention and Education) legislation intended to help support those on the front line, ranging from first responders to treatment providers in fighting the epidemic.

In addition, the intention is for more funding to be made available for alternative methods to combat the problem.

“We appreciate the ongoing series of steps between the counties and the state,” Wehmeier said.

He recognized Wisconsin Sen. Neal Kedzie, R-Elkhorn, and state Rep. Stephen Nass, R-Whitewater, whose districts cover Jefferson County.

Last week, he noted, Jefferson County hosted Youth Government Day at the courthouse. For one of the assignments, the students held a discussion on the heroin epidemic and shared their views.

“There was a great mature discussion that took place afterward with numerous great ideas that we hope to implement going forward,” Wehmeier said. “There was one consistent message about more education and awareness of the issue moving forward.”

The administrator said the ultimate goal is to change the message he received last year so it is not one that says young people are dying, but, rather, it reports that “our kids are thriving and excelling.

“This is the purpose of the summit tonight: to help with a starting point for these mature conversations and the education to begin,” Wehmeier concluded.