

'You don't take heroin; it takes you: drug task force

By Ryan Whisner, Union regional editor | Posted: Wednesday, January 28, 2015 10:09 am

"You don't take heroin; it takes you."

That was the lasting message offered by the Jefferson County Drug Task Force at its educational forums held at Fort Atkinson High School Monday and Tuesday.

Presented in conjunction with other area law enforcement agencies, "The Truth About Heroin: An Evening of Information and Solutions" was a two-part program, with the first for students on Monday afternoon and second for parents and the general public Tuesday night.



TRUTH ABOUT HEROIN

The program was developed as the Jefferson County Drug Task Force began working with Drug Abuse Resistance Education or DARE program officers from Watertown, Lake Mills and Fort Atkinson, as well as the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Police Services.

Participants included Jefferson County Drug Task Force Detective Sgt. Margareta Gray, Lake Mills Police Officer Troy Oestreich, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Police Services Detective Cal Servi, Fort Atkinson Police Officer Dan Hefty, Watertown Police Officer Stacy Schroeder and Watertown Police Capt. Curtis Kleppin.

Presentations included Servi and Gray speaking about heroin and choices to the students and parents, respectively.

Tuesday night's presentation was followed by what Gray defined as "impact speakers," Melanie Crandall and Tyler Lydert and his family, sharing their respective stories of how heroin affected their families (see related stories on A1 and A12).

A question-and-answer period was held after the presentation Tuesday. The program will be available on the School District of Fort Atkinson website.

Persons with questions are encouraged to contact law enforcement, specifically the Jefferson County Drug Task Force at (920) 568-2580.

In addition, Fort Atkinson High School Principal Dan Halvorsen, Fort Atkinson Officer Dan Hefty and Fort Atkinson City Council member and Crossroads teacher Jude Hartwick are organizing a group to be more proactive in helping combat the heroin problem within the community. To become involved, contact Halvorsen at the high school or Hefty at dhefty@fortpd.com or Hartwick at hartwickj@fortschools.org.

"We believe part of law enforcement is protecting people," Hefty said Tuesday night. "Part of protecting people is making sure people make informed decisions about their lifestyles. So many people get hooked on heroin and don't even know how it happened."

On Tuesday, Gray explained that heroin is one of the most powerful opiates, derived from morphine, one of the

major components of the poppy plant.

While 87 percent of the world's heroin comes from Afghanistan, 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," Gray said.

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

She advised parents to be on the look out for the slang terms used for heroin that include "h," boy, China white, black tar and chocolate fire. Terms used for referencing use include banging, on the nod or rig, the latter referring to the paraphernalia or kit to take the drug.

As a schedule I narcotic, possession of heroin is a felony.

The increased prevalence of the heroin locally follows a state and nationwide trend, largely due to the rising difficulty of illegally obtaining prescription opiate painkillers, driving more addicts to its sister drug — heroin. Gray noted that a lot of prescription medications are opiod-based, such as Oxycotin.

After using the opiate 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, she said.

The sergeant noted that one of the problems is that the opiates are being over-prescribed.

"You have individuals going doctor shopping, looking for a doctor that is willing to prescribe them Oxycotin, hydrocodone for their aches and pains," Gray said. "People will go to all extremes to try and get a prescription for these opiate medications."

Wisconsin recently developed a prescription drug-monitoring program, which makes it difficult for people to doctor shop.

Gray said that dating back to 2008, there was a transition in the amount of prescription medications versus heroin being seized on the streets by task force members.

From 2009-13, a total of 13.08 grams of heroin has been seized by the Jefferson County Drug Task Force. In 2014, due in part to 26.4 grams seized at a residence in Watertown, a total of 39.53 grams was collected.

Putting that number in perspective, she said, the typical dose of heroin is approximately .02 to .03 grams.

Heroin typically comes in very small packages or "bindles": a small piece of tinfoil folded to a size smaller than a quarter. It is thin, it's small and can be very easily hidden.

"We don't go after people that are not dealers; we want to get those people that are selling off the streets," Gray said.

In 2010, the task force, using undercover officers and informants, participated in 14 purchases of heroin. That number dipped to 13 in 2011 and rose to 42 in 2012 and 53 in 2013, before dropping to 21 in 2014.

Gray said it might be because officers have gotten to higher-level dealers and are purchasing larger quantities of heroin from them.

A higher number of possession cases was listed in 2014, which Gray attributed to there being issues of possession at scenes of overdoses.

Charges of possession of heroin are fewer than one might expect due to the quick use of the drug. 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. “They go wherever they can to use it as quickly as they can.”

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

Users have told Gray that when injecting heroin, 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.

“The drug passes very rapidly to the brain’s opiod receptors,” she said.

To combat this health danger, many law enforcement agencies are moving toward officers being trained to use and carry Narcan, which counters the effects of opioid overdose. Squads in the City of Watertown carry the drug and the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office and other agencies are working on doing so.

Other affects of heroin intake include nausea, vomiting, itching, dry mouth. warm skin and slowed heart rate, the audience was told.

Long-term affects, other than possible death from overdose, include addiction, tolerance affects, collapsed veins, bacterial inflections and potential exposure from needle sharing to HIV or hepatitis C.

In 2013, Gray said, there were five reported opiate or heroin-related overdose deaths in Jefferson County and in 2014, there were seven, including two in Fort Atkinson, one in Jefferson and four in Watertown.

Gray emphasized the importance of calling 911 in the event of an overdose.

In 2014, 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. The law grants immunity to anyone who calls 911 to report a drug overdose.

“Nothing will matter to these individuals other than their next dose,” Gray said. “Once people try it, they will do anything they can to get their hands on their next fix.”

She explained that heroin is cheaper than the Oxycotin and Percocet. For \$20, a person can buy a bindle of heroin. Comparatively, on the street, one 40-milligram tablet of Oxycotin is \$40.

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

“It is not that anyone wants to commit the crime. They need to commit the crime in order to get their fix,” Gray said.

Gray emphasized that the crimes were not being committed to hurt anyone, but, rather, to support the perpetrators' heroin addiction.

Other impacts on the users include giving up legitimate jobs because they can't function. Some start selling heroin to support their own habit.

"Family and friends no longer become important," Gray said, adding that withdrawal from heroin use can peak within two days and last for as long as a week.

"This is a community issue," she continued. ... Yes, we do enforce violations of law, but we also know we need to get out and educate the public. It takes enforcement, education and treatment."

The increased presence of heroin in the county has boosted other related criminal activities.

More than once, Gray said, heroin use has been linked to burglaries and strong-armed robberies involving residences, banks and gas stations. Those include robberies at Badger Bank's Fort Atkinson and Jefferson locations, gas stations in Fort Atkinson, Jefferson and Watertown, and residential break-ins in Johnson Creek.

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, including many robberies and burglaries in 2013 and 2014, have been linked to heroin or other drugs.

Two heroin-related overdose deaths in 2012 led to homicide charges in Jefferson County and two others deaths in 2014 have led to homicide charges. Numerous other instances remain under investigation.

"It's kind of a domino effect. It doesn't just affect one person; it affects multiple," she said.

On Monday, addressing the students at For Atkinson High School, the focus of the presentation was about the choices the students make.

"You are going to make decisions that you probably haven't had to make here," Gray said, citing choices of saying yes or no to underage drinking, smoking marijuana or using more harsh drugs, including heroin.

"You think just because you never do it, that it won't be a question that you will have to answer," she said.

"Somewhere along the line, you will be asked to use a hard drug or you will know somebody that is getting exposed to these hard drugs. You've got to be the one that makes the decision to say no."

Gray pointed out that there have been many upstanding citizens who contribute to the community that suddenly get caught in the trap of heroin.

"When you leave this gymnasium today, think about the decisions you make in the future. How will they impact you, how will they impact your friends, how will they impact your family?"

Detective Servi gave the primary presentation to the students Monday.

"In high school, you are faced with many choices," Servi said. "It is what you do with those choices that defines almost the rest of your future. You have no idea of how a poor choice can affect you in the future."

He noted that as police officers, the members of the task force see children making poor choices and what happens as a result.

“We see their lives deteriorate because they get involved in drugs and alcohol. We see that time after time,” the detective said.

Servi talked about the influences in the students' lives such as friends, music, television, movies and use of phone apps.

The detective noted that there seems to be no television show, film or song that does not have some reference to drugs, alcohol or sex.

Servi cited a statistic indicating that 4,700 people under the age of 21 die as a result of underage drinking every year. Most importantly, he said alcohol consumption can impact decision-making abilities.

“Has anyone ever seen their best friend or somebody they know start drinking and just get stupid all of a sudden?” he asked. “They start making poor decisions. If they wouldn't do it while they were sober, why would they do it while they are drinking, because it impairs their decisionmaking abilities.”

Servi said one in 10 high school teens get behind the wheel in high after they've been drinking.

“That is a statistic we need to stop,” he said.

Continuing, he told the students that when they combine alcohol with any other drugs, it will have an adverse impact.

He noted that nobody just makes the jump to heroin.

“It starts out with alcohol and starts out with other drugs,” Servi said. “Nobody wants to shoot up alone; they want to shoot up with their friends.”

The detective said people today have gotten used to taking something to fix a problem, and drug use is not different.

“Every day, 2,400 youth ages 12-17 abuse a pain reliever for the first time,” Servi said. “More teens abuse prescription drugs than any other illicit drugs except marijuana.”

He said taking pills when younger, builds up a tolerance.

“When you are an addict, nothing else matters except the next high, and you will do anything you can to get it,” Servi said. “The choices you make are going to change your future.”

The message to both students and parents was universal: “if you see something, say something.”

“You have to be accountable for each other; you have to take care of each other,” Servi said.

To help someone who is addicted to heroin or any other drug, he said, the first thing is to try persuading him or her to seek some help.

“Pay attention to their behavior,” Servi said. “If your friend drastically changes who they are, they become distant and no longer want to be a part of anything, get involved. Be their friend and if they don't want to talk about it,

talk to other friends. Talk to whoever you talk to and be there for them as a friend.”

Servi encouraged the students to get involved in clubs and activities of interest.

“The more involved you are, the less likely you are to reach out to something like heroin,” the detective said.

“Have the will power to tell someone no.”

Also, contacting Jefferson County Human Services or law enforcement is an option.

“Sometimes calling is the most important thing you can do for someone,” Gray said. “if they don't want to help themselves, help them get help. Take this seriously and think about the decisions you make in your life and how they will impact you, your friends and your future.”