

Local heroin epidemic prompts county summit

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
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As cases, deaths involving dangerous drug mount, leaders seek to involve community in solution to crisis

Felony charges filed recently against a 28-year-old woman accused of dealing heroin in the Town of Grafton while with her young children may be alarming but they are nothing new in Ozaukee County.

And that's the problem, Lt. Rodney Galbraith, who leads the sheriff's department drug unit, said.

"Heroin is the No.1 worst problem I've seen in Ozaukee County in my 34 years on the job," he said.

"Before the heroin epidemic, if you asked me what our biggest law enforcement problem was, I would have said, 'We have a few burglaries, some domestic abuse and the usual drunk driving.' I don't mean to minimize any of those crimes. It's just that we really didn't have one overwhelming problem. Now, everything is about heroin."

Young people are dying, addiction is shattering lives and crime related to drug use, which is most of the crime in Ozaukee County, is flooding the court system — all because of heroin and similar drugs, authorities said.

"In Ozaukee County right now, I'm very confident in saying that 80% of our property crimes are drug related," Galbraith said.

So serious is the problem that a number of agencies will host the Ozaukee Heroin Summit from 7 to 9 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 29, at the Ozaukee County Pavilion at the county fairgrounds, W67 N890 Washington Ave., Cedarburg.

The brainchild of State Rep. Duey Stroebel of Cedarburg, the event is intended to inform the public about the heroin epidemic and its impact on the residents Ozaukee County.

Among the presenters will be federal, state and local law enforcement officials, District Attorney Adam Gerol and a representative of the county's Public Health Department. Undersheriff Jim Johnson said a recovering heroin addict or the family of an addict may be among the panelists. The event is a reflection of the fact that the use of heroin and similar drugs is not only a problem for law enforcement agencies and the court system but the public in general, and thus requires a community response, authorities said.

"The heroin problem needs to be addressed, and the way we do that has to be multifaceted," Johnson said. "It needs to start by realizing the extent of the problem and that it affects people

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at all socioeconomic levels.”

Solving the problem, Galbraith said, involves questions that are difficult to answer.

“Why would kids from Ozaukee County get hooked on heroin?” he asked. “We have to figure that out and we have to find a way to make sure the use of heroin and other opiates aren’t an option for them in the future.”

At its most basic level, the problem involves a demand for heroin and an ample supply of the highly addictive and destructive drug, which, authorities said, is why accused drug dealers like Mary Brown of Milwaukee are selling heroin in the heart of Ozaukee County.

Charged with three felony counts of manufacture/delivery of heroin on Dec. 13, Brown is accused of selling \$1,350 worth of the drug to an undercover deputy on three occasions between Nov. 27 and Dec. 12.

Each time, Brown met the deputy in a park-and-ride lot in the Town of Grafton and sold her about three grams of heroin for \$450, according to the criminal complaint.

During some of the deals, Brown’s 9-month-old and 2-year-old children were with her, the complaint states.

She is being held in the Ozaukee County jail on \$10,000 bail.

A man who was in the car with Brown during one of the deals, Kenneth Brown, 26, of Milwaukee, is charged with one felony count of manufacturing/delivering heroin.

It was no mistake the Browns were allegedly dealing drugs in Ozaukee County, Galbraith said.

“We know Milwaukee drug dealers are targeting suburban users like those in Ozaukee County because the dealers know these users have money,” he said.

The three drug-related homicide cases pending in Ozaukee County all involved accused Milwaukee dealers charged with selling fatal doses of heroin to Ozaukee County residents who died of overdoses.

For dealers, heroin is an attractive product because it’s relatively inexpensive and highly addictive.

“Dealers know that once they get their customers hooked, they’ll be coming back for more,” Galbraith said.

A marketing strategy that targets Ozaukee County drug users is becoming more aggressive, he said.

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“In this case (against Brown), if our undercover ‘addict’ wasn’t reaching out to the dealer every couple of days, the dealer was calling her to arrange a deal,” Galbraith said.

The real heroin addicts are typically between the ages of 18 and 30, Galbraith said, and they’re not first-time drug users.

“Most heroin users are already drug addicts,” he said.

There are multiple roads that lead to heroin addiction, but one of the most common in Ozaukee County and throughout the nation is prescription painkillers. That’s because narcotic opioid drugs such as hydrocodone and oxycodone, also known by the brand names Vicodin and Oxycontin, contain the same active ingredient and have a similar affect on the brain as heroin.

“Narcotic painkillers can be the gateway to heroin,” Galbraith said. “Maybe it’s a case where a younger person is involved in sports and gets injured. A doctor prescribes pain pills, which when used properly have a place, but the person gets hooked and starts abusing them.

“The problem for addicts is that pain pills are hard to find and expensive. Heroin is a cheap alternative.”

And a deadly one. According to Johnson, eight people died as a result of overdosing on heroin or other narcotic opiate drugs in Ozaukee County this year.

Several more, he said, came close. Authorities don’t track non-fatal overdoses, but they know from experience that they are all too common, Johnson said.

Now authorities want to make sure the public understands how prevalent and deadly heroin and other similar drugs are.

“We need to bring the community together and let people know what is going on with heroin in our county,” Galbraith said. “If they aren’t aware of the problem, they can’t help solve it.”

The Ozaukee Heroin Summit is free and open to the public.