



NEWS

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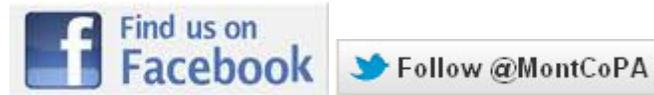
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Montco Announces Formation of Task Force To Address Rise in Heroin and Prescription Drug Overdoses

Norristown, PA (September 12, 2014) – The Montgomery County Commissioners Friday introduced the members of the county’s Overdose Task Force, a multi-disciplinary group of individuals, who will spend the next several months developing a strategy that will prevent life-threatening prescription drug and heroin overdoses as well as reduce the increasing number of overdose deaths in the county.

The task force will address these critical issues by evaluating the scope of the problem in neighborhoods, forming community partnerships, raising community awareness, and educating the public on the dangers associated with prescription drugs and heroin. The overall goal of this multidisciplinary task force is to foster a positive community approach that decreases the climbing numbers of overdose cases in Montgomery County.

“The genesis of this effort came from a conversation I had with Chief (William) Kelly (Chief of the Abington Township Police Department) a few months ago,” said Josh Shapiro, chair of the Montgomery County Commissioners. “Chief Kelly explained to me the growing danger to our population from heroin and the misuse of prescription drugs. The result is this talented group of people we have assembled to come up with solutions to address this problem.”

The announcement of the task force came at a press conference in the offices of the county commissioners, and immediately afterward the group held its first meeting. The task force expects to issue its findings by the end of this year or early in 2015.

Kelly, who is a leader of the task force, said he raised the issue with Shapiro because he knew “he had the will and the wherewithal to bring together the agencies and resources to address this growing tragedy.”

“During the first six months of this year, I became increasingly concerned as I repeatedly heard from my officers about the sudden and dramatic increase in drug overdoses and deaths from those overdoses that they were seeing,” Kelly said. “This growing heroin overdose epidemic is especially tragic because it includes hard-working, usually law-abiding citizens who became addicted not from the drugs bought on the street from a pusher, but from drugs legally purchased from a legitimate pharmacy with a legal prescription they received to control pain after an injury or a surgery,” Kelly explained.

“They had not decided to experiment with drugs,” Kelly continued. “They were just following the directions of their attending doctor, and once addicted they found it almost impossible to obtain, or pay for, the pain medication that caused their addiction. Out of desperation, they switched over to the drug that recently has become plentiful and cheap – heroin, but today's heroin is often much stronger than in the past and is often laced with other substances, including some that are toxic.”

“On the front lines of this crisis--on our streets and in our courtrooms, the Montgomery County law enforcement community is routinely seeing the devastation caused by prescription drug and heroin abuse,” said Kevin Steele, first assistant district attorney in Montgomery County and one of the leaders of the task force. “This is our public health and safety epidemic.”

Steele said most of the heroin addicts he sees in law enforcement begin their addiction with prescription drugs. “Sadly in each of the past several years the numbers of deaths have continued to increase due to heroin overdoses in Montgomery County, he said.

“Addiction is a dark, chronic, debilitating disease that does not hide and does not discriminate,” said Eileen Lafferty, another leader of the task force and education director for the county’s Office of Drug and Alcohol Prevention. “This illness has no regard for childhood dreams, parent’s hopes, or the many lives it touches while running rampant through all walks of life.” Lafferty said there were 50 deaths from overdose in 2008. That number rose to 79 deaths in 2012. Currently, Montgomery County ranks seventh in the nation for prescription overdoses and heroin fatalities, according to Lafferty. “These statistics demonstrate that we can no longer ignore this epidemic level in our society,” Lafferty said.

The fourth member of the task force leadership is Lori Schreiber, a community outreach consultant to the Montgomery County Behavioral Health Department and an Abington Township Commissioner, and she is confident that the multi-disciplinary makeup of the task force will produce results.

“I have seen an alarming change occur with the recent rising trend of opioid use in our community,” she said. “The overdose taskforce has emerged as a response to the current potentially deadly rise in the availability and use of heroin within Montgomery County. I am honored to work with our chosen multi-disciplinary team. Our goal is to determine the most effective combination of law enforcement, education, and treatment methods to try to stop the spread of heroin and other narcotic misuse, to better save lives, and to protect our communities.”