

Marlborough: AG Healey talks opioid education

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By

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MARLBOROUGH – Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey called for more opioid prevention and treatment programs to help end the epidemic that is ravaging the country, state and region.

Citing a statistic that 90 percent of adults with a drug or alcohol addiction started when they were under 18 years old, Healey stressed the need for an influx of youth education programs to teach students of all ages about the dangers of opioid use and addiction.

“Getting to young people at an earlier age is where it’s at and a good investment,” Healey said during a roundtable discussion with city and local leaders at Marlborough High School Wednesday. “... We know what could happen if we don’t reach kids in time.”

Healey’s office recently awarded \$700,000 in grants to support school-based prevention education initiatives to address opioid dependence and addiction. Marlborough received a \$20,000 grant to bring the Botvin Life Skills program and curriculum to more than 1,500 students in grades 4-8. An adult program will complement the student program. The grant will also fund the hiring of a part-time licensed alcohol and drug counselor at Hildreth School and Marlborough High, said Superintendent Maureen Greulich.

“There’s no greater issue affecting families in our state than this crisis,” Healey said.

Marlborough High School seniors Alec Turner and Emma Lincoln told Healey they haven't heard students talk about struggles with opioid use, but know it is likely an issue for some.

Turner, a multi-sport athlete and captain of the high school lacrosse team, said athletic coaches held meetings with their players before the season to discuss the dangers of abusing opioids. Healey was impressed the athletic department and coaches took the initiative to meet with students on the issue.

Treatment programs are also key to helping addicts recover, but Healey and state Rep. Danielle Gregoire, D-Marlborough, said beds in rehab facilities are difficult to come by.

"I believe firmly we need more treatment in the state and more access to treatment," Healey said.

A three-pronged attack of education, treatment and enforcement is vital to reversing the course of the epidemic, said Police Chief David Giorgi. More than 20 city residents have died in the past three years due to opioid overdoses.

"All those have to work together," he said.

Kathy Leonard knows first-hand the pain and sadness that encompasses the parents of struggling addicts. Her son, Jonathan, died in December 2015 of a drug overdose.

She has since formed support groups and an outreach center to steer addicts toward treatment. Leonard recently spoke at conferences in Atlanta and Washington D.C.

"Massachusetts is pretty advanced in what we're doing, but we've got a long way to go," she said.

Mayor Arthur Vigean said there has been some progress - Middlesex County has seen a decrease in opioid-related deaths in the past four months - but agreed more education and treatment are necessary.

"We just need to stay on top of it," the mayor said. "It's going to be a long education process."