

2019 Stanly Year in Review: The opioid epidemic

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For more than a year, Stanly County has been entrenched in a battle against the opioid epidemic.

At different times this past year, Stanly has led the state in the number of opioid overdoses per month resulting in emergency room visits, according to data released by the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services. From January to November, the county has had 92 opioid overdose ER visits, less than the 124 during the same time period last year.

Though the state numbers are important, they account for only a small portion of the total number of people in Stanly affected by opioids, since the vast majority of them do not actually go to the hospital.

According to recent EMS data provided by paramedic Mike Campbell, Stanly EMS responded to 157 opioid overdose calls from May through the end of September, triple the amount of emergency room visits during the same time span (50).

In order to better respond to the epidemic, the EMS created a community program where paramedics specifically respond to opioid overdose calls. With support from grants, including a two-year, \$400,000 Blue Cross Blue Shield grant the department received this year, the program began in May.

The community paramedic members consisting of three paramedics and a Monarch peer navigator are part of a post-overdose response team that functions as a bridge. Members of the program initially treat patients with Narcan (a medication that reverses opioid overdoses) and transport them to Monarch's behavioral health clinic in Albemarle.

At the beginning of the year, the Stanly County Sheriff's Office created a drug interdiction program, which consists of four deputies whose main role is to prevent drugs from entering the county. The deputies patrol the roadways into Stanly, looking for indicators of vehicles entering the county that are trafficking in narcotics or money.

Since the beginning of the year, deputies have made 193 arrests, 440 charges and obtained 176 search warrants. They have seized 129 grams of methamphetamines (approximately \$12,900), 22 grams of cocaine (\$2,200), 10 grams of heroin (\$1,000), 1,072 grams of marijuana (\$7,100), 20 firearms and a little more than \$2,000 in cash.

The county has also received several grants to help alleviate the problem.

The Health Department received a three-year, \$1 million grant in the fall from the Health Resources and Services Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. More than \$400,000 is budgeted for medical services and supplies. Another \$305,000 will go to behavioral health services, almost \$118,000 to behavioral health prescriptions (including Suboxone) and \$14,400 to provide Naloxone (120 units a year) to the community.

The Center for Prevention Services in Charlotte was recently awarded a five-year, \$1.25 million Partnership for Success Grant to serve Stanly. The grant, funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, began in October and runs through Sept. 30, 2024.

The grant provides approximately \$260,000 per year to fund new efforts in Stanly aimed at reducing substance abuse. The grant will help in numerous ways including providing a youth drug survey to students in the sixth, eighth, tenth and twelfth grades next spring. Training for middle and high school teachers and counselors over the next two years in the Botvin LifeSkills Training program, which has been used in 39 countries and has been shown to be effective in reducing alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and other drug use, will also be funded by the grant along with providing a trained youth coordinator to educate high school students about the dangers of drugs.

In order to prevent the opioid crisis from worsening, the health department has worked with the community to implement Naloxone and CPR trainings at Will's Place, a recovery resource center. Upon completion, people can receive Naloxone kits.

There are also drug drop boxes around the county including the Albemarle Police Department's main office, Oakboro Town Hall and Norwood Police Department.

Several community meetings this past year were conducted to inform the public about efforts to address the epidemic with plans to have more meetings in the coming year.

The hope among many in the medical community currently working to alleviate the opioid problem is for more citizens to join Project Lazarus next year.

Project Lazarus is a local group comprised of public health, health care, first responders, mental health personnel and concerned citizens that regularly meet to try and combat the drug problem in the county.