



The Daily Gazette

## **Saratoga County sues more than 30 pharmaceutical companies**

By Ann Friedman | January 21, 2018

*'We can't arrest our way out of this; we need all hands-on deck'*

SARATOGA COUNTY — Saratoga County filed a lawsuit on Wednesday in state Supreme Court against 31 pharmaceutical companies that manufacture, distribute and prescribe opioids.

Saratoga County joins Schenectady County, which also filed a state Supreme Court lawsuit in June against more than a dozen major pharmacy companies.

The county, which announced plans to pursue the lawsuit three months ago, chose New York City-based law firm Napoli Shkolnik PLLC as its legal representation.

In December, The Washington Post reported that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that American life expectancy at birth had declined for the second consecutive year in 2016, mainly due to the 21 percent increase in drug overdose deaths.

Ed Kinowski, chairman of the county's Board of Supervisors, has made addressing the opioid crisis a top priority.

"We all recognize that the drug overdose problem is a public health problem, and it needs to be addressed on a level beyond what we are currently able to provide through our law enforcement, mental health and public health departments," Kinowski said at a Jan. 2 Board of Supervisors meeting.

"In 2018, we will be doing everything within our power to hold the drug manufacturers and distributors that have recklessly engaged in behaviors that have caused this epidemic accountable for their actions."

On Tuesday, the day before the lawsuit was filed, the Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to adopt a proposed local law declaring the opioid epidemic as a public nuisance.

The law also seeks to establish a cost-recovery procedure for the county to recoup expenses from combatting the epidemic.

“The opioid epidemic continues to hit too close to home here in Saratoga County,” said Steven Dorsey, Saratoga County attorney, in a statement. “This local law is another step the county is taking to protect our residents from the dangers of these drugs, and allows the county to recover costs associated with the prevention, treatment, recovery and public safety expenses caused by the opioids crisis.”

Kevin Tollisen, chair of the county's Law and Finance Committee and town supervisor in Halfmoon, said the law would help the county with its pending litigation against pharmaceutical companies.

"We have a responsibility to taxpayers on how we spend our money and the county should be reimbursed for the extraordinary resources it's using to combat this problem," he said. "It's a public health issue."

Tollisen added that he has organized several educational forums in his town on opioids to educate the public.

"It's about getting information out there to say 'This is a problem,'" he said. "It won't go away if we don't work together."

Saratoga County Sheriff Michael Zurlo, like Tollisen, said education is one of the key factors to combating the opioid epidemic.

"I've held five heroin and opioid forums since January of last year and we're hosting another one in February," he said. "We need to get the word out."

Zurlo added that having deputies travel to schools across the county to educate students on the dangers of drugs and hosting drug buyback days where residents can dispose of prescriptions also help.

The county's proposed opioid law is a step in the right direction, according to Zurlo.

"I consider the heroin and opioid problem an epidemic and I see it on a daily basis," he said. "We need to use every tool we have available to fight this problem.

"It sends a message to pharmaceutical companies that we won't put up with the over-selling of prescription drugs and to drug dealers that once you're arrested, we'll come after you."

Last year, Zurlo said there were close to 30 drug overdose deaths in Saratoga County compared to 25 in 2016.

"That number is rising," he said. "We can't arrest our way out of this; we need all hands on deck."

A public hearing on the proposed opioid law will be held on Feb. 14 at 4:30 p.m. in the meeting room of the Board of Supervisors at 40 McMaster St., Ballston Spa.

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