

The Saratogian (<http://www.saratogian.com>)

Saratoga County joins opioid lawsuit

Saratoga County hopes to recover expenses in fighting crisis

By Paul Post, The Saratogian

Monday, October 16, 2017

BALLSTON SPA, N.Y. >> Saratoga County is fighting back against the opioid crisis by authorizing legal action against companies and doctors that make, distribute and prescribe such drugs irresponsibly.

The county has spent large sums for training and addiction programs, equipment purchases, hiring additional law enforcement and housing persons incarcerated for drug-related offenses.

By pursuing litigation, the county hopes to recover some of these expenses.

“Saratoga County has invested significant resources to combat opioid abuse and addiction,” county Administrator Spencer Hellwig said. “We’ve trained our first responders to take action when they encounter someone experiencing an overdose. We’ve also had to increase our Social Services programs to aide residents who are struggling with addictions. In addition to the irreplaceable cost of life, the strain on time, training, and equipment for our county is not minimal.”

No less than a half-dozen county departments are involved in one way or another with opioids including the sheriff’s office, district attorney, probation, mental health and public health.

“It’s pretty widespread,” Hellwig said.

The board of supervisors, at a recent special meeting, authorized hiring the New York City-based firm, Napoli Shkolnik, PLLC, to pursue litigation on the county’s behalf. The firm, which specializes in opioid cases, has been retained by almost 20 municipalities nationwide including Nassau County and the city of Dayton, Ohio, which has been referred to as the “heroin epicenter” of the country.

Plans call for Saratoga County to join a lawsuit pending in state Supreme Court Suffolk County.

“It’s similar to tobacco litigation,” Hellwig said. “Right now there’s only two law firms in the state involved in this type of litigation.”

The county will only be added to cases Napoli Shkolnik, PLLC pursues in New York state. The firm has offices throughout the U.S.

The law firm will only be compensated with a portion of any settlements that may be reached. Taxpayer dollars will not be used to hire the firm.

“Like most areas of the state, opioid abuse has become an epidemic in Saratoga County,” said board of supervisors Chairman Ed Kinowski, R-Stillwater. “The ease of access, and over-prescription of these dangerous drugs has led to the death of too many of our friends and neighbors. The misrepresentation of the nature of these drugs has led to an alarming rise in addiction and overdoses.”

Aside from the direct health impact opioids have on users, the crimes addicts commit to get drugs exact a far-reaching financial toll.

“People who are addicted will do anything, from petit larceny to grand larceny, to get money,” said Karen Heggen, Saratoga County district attorney. “There have been several embezzlement cases where people claim it’s because they or a family member has a drug problem. So it’s impacting communities in many different ways.”

Burglaries and identity theft are common, too, and the problem isn’t confined to Saratoga County by any means.

Fifteen years ago, 80 percent to 90 percent of Washington County drug court cases were from driving while intoxicated, District Attorney Tony Jordan said.

“Today over half are related to narcotics,” he said. “Even the ones that are DWI, probably 75 percent of them have an underpinning of a narcotic addiction, whether it’s heroin, pills or crack cocaine. So what does all of that mean? Unlike DWI, people addicted to heroin or narcotics are also stealing from their family and breaking into businesses. When it comes to non-sex type crimes, easily two-thirds have an underpinning of heroin, opioids or opiate-based drug.”

“It really is scary and it puts a lot more pressure on jails, law enforcement businesses and strain on communities,” he said.

There is no typical path to addiction. But quite often, a person may be given pain killers following surgery or a serious injury. Before long, without realizing it or intending to, they’re hooked.

A state “I-Stop” law, which took effect in 2013, has made it more difficult for people to obtain prescription drugs from physicians. Although well-intended, it has prompted many people to buy drugs illegally or turn to heroin, which is less expensive, as an alternative.

“Heroin isn’t just pure heroin any more,” Heggen said. “It’s being laced with fentanyl and other derivatives that are highly addictive. People are chasing that high to the point where there are a lot more deaths. In the lab reports we’re getting from drug-related deaths, a lot of them are being laced with other things.”

Fentanyl is a manufactured opioid used for long-term pain relief.

“It’s a killer,” Jordan said. “We had our first case where we had an undercover buy, purportedly for heroin. But when it got tested it was 100 percent fentanyl. It’s being substituted for heroin and it’s about 100 times stronger. Kids are making pills out of fentanyl shaped like oxycodone and selling them as oxycodone, so there’s a real public health risk to our youth.”

URL: <http://www.saratogian.com/general-news/20171016/saratoga-county-joins-opioid-lawsuit>

© 2017 The Saratogian (<http://www.saratogian.com>)