

Opioid epidemic has been expensive for Manatee. County may sue drug companies for payback



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Manatee County is considering hiring an outside law firm to potentially sue opioid manufacturers and distributors, County Attorney Mickey Palmer said Tuesday.

Palmer told commissioners he is choosing between two firms to file either an individual or class action lawsuit. He didn't divulge the names of the drug companies in question, but said Tampa-based Trenam Law and Napoli Shkolnik from New York are being considered to represent the county.

Napoli Shkolnik has a page on its website dedicated to the opioid epidemic, outlining how the drugs have surged, why they're dangerous and who is responsible for an overdose death.

The opioid epidemic has affected Manatee County for several years since illicit pain management clinics across Florida were shut down, opening up a generation to feed their addictions with heroin, fentanyl and carfentanil. This led to an overwhelming number of overdose deaths, crowding the medical examiner's office — in 2015, Manatee County had the state's highest per capita rate of overdose deaths related to morphine, fentanyl and cocaine.

Firefighters and law enforcement have to be equipped with naloxone, the opioid overdose antidote, and the [cost to the county continues to grow](#) as sometimes multiple doses are required depending on the potency of the drug. Even pharmacies like CVS and Walgreens began selling it.

Palmer said the county is focusing the potential lawsuit on how opioids were marketed and said officials would be seeking to “recover a wide range of costs.” This includes the increased need for social programs, EMS response, drug court, naloxone, health care services and the medical examiner's office.

“That's just really the tip of the iceberg,” Palmer said.

While there isn't a set timeline on when the lawsuit would be filed, Palmer said he will be bringing the matter before the commissioners for approval by at least January.

Commissioner Carol Whitmore said she often checks in with what's going on at the Manatee Memorial Hospital emergency room. While the number of overdoses has decreased there, she said, “we still have a major problem and a long way to go.”

“If this is one thing that can prevent more deaths, it's worth looking at and then I'll make a decision,” she said.

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