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Opioid-related costs prompts Henry County to hire specialized attorneys

By Asia Ashley

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McDONOUGH— The opioid epidemic and its toll on local government and public safety agencies has prompted Henry County to take action against the matter.

Henry County commissioners on Tuesday voted to hire Napoli Shkolnik PLLC out of New York and Edmond, Lindsay & Hoffer, LLP out of Atlanta to represent Henry County in litigation related to opioid arrests. The two firms offered to represent the county and have active claims around the country, including Georgia, against manufacturers, distributors and dispensers.

County Attorney Patrick Jaugstetter said with “a dramatic increase in the prescription opioid medication and in overdoses and addictions,” the county is hoping the firms can to recover some of the expenses that the county has incurred as result of the opioid epidemic.

“Since the 1990s opioid manufacturers, distributors and some physicians have engaged in a coordinated effort to understate the addictive nature of opioids and over prescribe them,” Jaugstetter said Tuesday. “Because the criminal problems that result in the addictions, Henry County like every other local government in the state, has been incurring substantial expenses to deal with the arresting, adjudicating, treating and incarcerating individuals that are either overdosed or addicted to opioids.”

Often times, he said, people run out of money to get them or the prescriptions stop, and then they engage in criminal activity to finance their physiological addiction.

Jaugstetter said the two firms are nationally recognized in representation of product liability type cases and the county won't pay the firms, but instead, their fee will be a percentage of the recovery. The resolution adopted by the BOC says the firms will receive 25 percent of the recovery fees.

"If there's no recovery, there's no expense to the county," he said.

Maj. Chad Rosborough, commander of the Flint Circuit Drug Task Force, a specialized drug suppression unit, said last year there were just over 100 prescription drug-related arrests.

The task force includes the District Attorney's Office, the Solicitor's Office, the Sheriff's Office, the county police department, the Hampton Police Department, the Locust Grove Police Department, and the McDonough Police Department and focuses on increasing the number of drug arrests and decreasing the availability of drugs.

Rosborough said prescription drug addictions can often lead to addictions to stronger opioids like fentanyl and heroine. Heroine arrests have tripled in the last year in Henry County, according to Rosborough.

"Our prescription cases have been high for a while. In my opinion the prescription addictions epidemic has led us off into the heroine addiction," Rosborough explained. "People were addicted to opioid pills, and the state kinda tightened that up made it harder to get, then people went to buying heroine because they can get that same type of high, and it's cheaper and readily available."

Other common prescription opioids include morphine, methadone, hydrocodone, and oxycodone.

Rosborough said many agencies now use Narcan, a naloxone nasal spray kit used to reverse opioid overdoses that can often come with a price of up to \$200.

"It's not cheap," said Rosborough.

Drugfree.org reports that criminal justice costs related to opioid addictions are estimated at \$5 billion nationally.

It is currently unclear the actual amount of funds county-owned agencies have lost over the years related to opioid crime. Jaugstetter said it may take additional staff time to determine all the county's incurred costs.

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Asia Ashley joined the Henry Herald as its government reporter in December 2014. She is a graduate of Auburn University.