

YORK COUNTY SUES 25 OPIOID MANUFACTURERS, DISTRIBUTORS

York Dispatch

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With opioid-overdose deaths skyrocketing as 2017 comes to a close, York County is suing more than two dozen drug companies that "have intentionally misled the public about the dangers of opioids."

York County solicitor Glenn Smith has filed a 252-page complaint against 21 opioid manufacturers and distributors and four out-of-state doctors for downplaying the risks of using opioids, including Oxycontin, fentanyl and Percocet.

According to York County Coroner Pam Gay, 19 people died in November from suspected opioid overdoses — the highest number she's seen in a single month. In just the first five days of December, 10 people died from suspected overdoses, Smith said.

As of last week, the county had 93 confirmed heroin-related deaths and 35 suspected deaths in 2017 — that's 17 more confirmed deaths than last year's total of 76, 28 more than the 2015 total of 65 and 31 more than the 2014 total of 62.

"We believe the filing of this lawsuit is critical to ensure that York County's story is heard and the devastation it has endured — and will continue to endure — because of this opioid crisis is addressed by those responsible," Smith said Friday, Dec. 8, during a news conference announcing the lawsuit.

No one in York County is immune from the "death, pain and suffering caused by this opioid epidemic," District Attorney-elect Dave Sunday said at the news conference.

People are turning to crime to fuel their opioid addictions, grandparents are raising their grandchildren "in circumstances they would have never imagined," and taxpayers are facing a "massive, massive financial burden" because of the actions of the opioid companies the county is suing, he said.

"My hope is that this lawsuit will, at the very least, mitigate this financial impact on our community and on our taxpayers and put a stop to these deceptive business

practices that are affecting every York countian and decimating our community," Sunday said.

'Deception, aggressive marketing': Most of those who have died from suspected opioid overdoses in York County this year started taking opioids prescribed for pain before their addictions developed, Gay said.

For the past few years, officials and advocates have tried to encourage physicians to try using alternative methods, she said, adding that certain levels of pain do not require prescription-strength medication.

Gay said she supports the county's lawsuit against opioid producers because they should be held accountable if they used "deception and aggressive marketing" to push their products.

"We have been devastated financially in this county by the epidemic," she said, noting the costs of prosecuting drug offenders, conducting autopsies, preserving evidence and providing treatment programs.

If drug companies can be held accountable for their part in the opioid crisis, that money can be used to "get a better handle" on the scourge of opioids and to provide better access to treatment for users, Gay said.

'No cost': To handle the lawsuit, York County has retained New York-based law firm Napoli Shkolnik PLLC, Smith said, adding "there will be no cost to York County taxpayers with filing and litigation of this matter."

By filing the lawsuit, York County became the fourth county in the state to pursue litigation against companies profiting from the sale of opioids, joining Beaver, Delaware and Lackawanna counties.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro is one of 41 state attorneys general to serve major opioid manufacturers with subpoenas for information about how they market and sell prescription opioids.