

Prince George's Co. hires law firm to take on drug companies

Whitney Wild, WUSA 6:55 PM. EST December 27, 2017

BOWIE, MD (WUSA9) - "Everything became about using and finding the drug," said Mark Oxendine.

At just 28 years old, Oxendine has spent part his teens and all of his 20s battling drug addiction.

"I went to a dentist in Annapolis when I was 17, gave me a pretty big script and kept refilling it without very many questions," Oxendine said.

What he didn't know then: the drugs were highly addictive.

"Knowing everything I've been through, knowing the addictive properties of that medication, I would have never taken that and I don't recommend it to anybody," Oxendine said.

For the last two months, Oxendine has been living in Bowie at Champ's House Recovery, a non-profit sober home. He lives with 15 other men hoping to beat addictions.

Steven Clark is the executive director.

"I have seen in the last eight to ten years where you had mostly alcoholics, now we have mostly opioid addicts," Clark said.

Stories like these are pushing officials in Prince George's County to take action.

"It's a crisis," said Scott Peterson, a spokesman for Prince George's County Executive Rushern Baker III.

Peterson said the county has now hired law firm Napoli Shkolnik LLC to explore a potential lawsuit against the companies pumping opioids into the market.

Opioids killed 63 people in Prince George's County from January to June, and the cost to save lives is significant.

"Reports even from our fire department show us they're running twice as many runs on overdoses, and of course this all equates to cost to local governments to deal with this sort of issue," Peterson said.

He points out the crisis has forced the county to spend tax dollars on resources such as Narcan to fight overdose deaths.

Prince George's County joins a growing list of municipalities, including counties in California and Montgomery County, Maryland, exploring or actively filing lawsuits against drug manufacturers and distributors.

Peterson said Napoli Shkolnik LLC is working on a contingency basis, meaning if the law firm doesn't secure a monetary recovery, the county doesn't pay.

"It's the right thing to do because we have our residents lives and their families' lives being impacted and at the end of the day we are doing our best to provide all the resources we can," Peterson said.

He added County Executive Baker has been working with counties across the nation in his role with the trade organization County Executives of America.

"Everyone is dealing with this issue," Peterson said.

Back at Champ's House, Oxendine said the burden of addiction is too heavy to bear any longer.

"I wish they had explained the medication more to me so I could make an educated decision if I wanted to take it or not," Oxendine said.

"It didn't seem worth it, what I'm losing, for the decision I'm making," he said.