

Cumberland County joins lawsuit against opioid makers



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Cumberland County has joined the swelling ranks of government agencies that are suing the makers of opioid pain medications.

County commissioners made that call Monday, following the lead of their counterparts in **Dauphin** and **York counties** and dozens of other county and municipal governments nationwide. The complaint is filed against more than 20 opioid manufactures and accuses the companies of intentionally misleading the public and medical community.

The manufactures failed to warn the public of the dangers of using opioids, which is a breach of the manufacturers responsibility under the law, according to the lawsuits. The suits seek compensation from the drug makers for costs governments are incurring from the opioid addiction crisis that is sweeping the nation.

Opioid pain medications are addictive in their own right and are often gateways to the use of illegal drugs, including heroin. Vince DiFilippo, chairman of the Board of Commissioners, said the county is joining in the suit -- at no cost to residents - - in order to address the crisis and fund local treatment initiatives. [Napoli Shkolnik PLLC](#) is representing the county and several other municipalities that have filed similar cases.

"We're looking at this as just another piece of a complex picture with the opioid epidemic," DiFilippo said. "We believe this type of lawsuit might be able to provide us with additional funds to help folks who are addicted."

Cumberland County logged 83 fatal drug overdoses last year, which equals a rate of once every four days, the commissioners noted. The overdose death rate in 2013 was about once every two weeks. Opioid overdoses were the leading cause of death for Americans under age 50 in 2017.

Within the past eight or so years, DiFilippo said people in the county began to look at substance abuse addiction differently, which has helped address the root causes and issues at hand. Instead of attacking drug abuse punitively, officials are working to fight problems over-prescription and ease of access to drugs, while also holding people accountable in a way that helps rehabilitation, DiFilippo said. This paved the way for treatment opportunities rather than packing people into prisons and turning correctional facilities into de facto detox centers.

Still, a funding barrier exists because of the high costs of treatment programs and [treatment drugs like Vivitrol](#) that have been proven to be more effective in fighting addiction, DeFilippo says. If this lawsuit is successful, and it could take years, DiFilippo says the money from the contingency lawsuit could be put towards the efforts run by the county.

"Every day, we hear in the news, through social media and from our neighbors the devastating effects this crisis is having in our County," DiFilippo said. "As a County, we have a significant number of programs and initiatives in place to respond to this crisis."

DiFilippo noted the many reasons the epidemic has spiked while saying litigation isn't the only answer to helping curb opioid addiction. With greater awareness, community involvement, increased funding, treatment programs and the like, the commissioner said he is hopeful the epidemic ends sooner than later to end the strain on the county's families.

"We're hoping the epidemic will reach its peak and things will reverse themselves," DiFilippo said. "How long it's going to take? We don't know."

[Earlier this year, the county launched an Opioid Intervention Court](#) for those who fall afoul of the law because of addiction. Prospective candidates are currently being identified.

The court exists in addition to the county's drug court. Judge Jessica Brewbaker, who will oversee the court, said in January that the court will "help keep

participants alive until they are stable enough to fully invest in their own recovery." Brewbaker said officials of the opioid court - billed as a "triage" operation - will intervene with opioid addicted defendants immediately to try to ensure they don't add to the death toll.

Officials in Cumberland and Perry counties are cooperating to start an intervention Warm Handoff Program for overdose survivors through Just For Today Recovery and Veterans Support Services. Another grassroots intercounty program, "I am the Solution," is aimed at fighting addiction through adult volunteers working with youth to prevent substance abuse of opioids, alcohol, marijuana and other drugs.

For more information on the OIC program, email OIC@ccpa.net.

This post was updated with comment from Cumberland County Commissioner Vince DiFilippo.

Reporter Wesley Robinson contributed to this post.

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