

County sues big pharmacy in opioid crisis

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Osceola County government is taking legal action in the fight against opioid addiction.

Osceola recently became the first county in Florida to file a lawsuit against pharmaceutical companies that manufacture highly addictive opioid medications.

The suit targets over 20 different big pharmacy companies, including the maker of OxyContin and corporations like Johnson & Johnson.



News-Gazette Photo/Martin Maddock
Facilities, such as the Park Place Behavioral Health Care, above, have seen a major uptick in the number of patients struggling with opioid addiction.

County staff members said the lawsuit is meant to hold the manufacturers accountable for increased healthcare, law enforcement and first responder costs incurred locally due to the opioid crisis.

Alachua County in northern Florida also filed a nearly identical suit

against more than a dozen drug manufacturers this week. Other counties across the state, including Miami-Dade and Palm Beach, are considering filing lawsuits, but have not yet done so.

Joseph Ciaccio, an attorney with the New York-based law firm Napoli Shkolnik, signed professional service contracts with both Osceola and Alachua counties. His firm represents more than 100 other counties nationwide in state-level litigation.

The County Commission voted to appoint the firm in November. Napoli Shkolnik is taking the case on for free due to a contingency clause, but the firm would be awarded 25 percent of the money if the county wins, said Osceola County Attorney Andrew Mai.

The suit, which is currently in circuit court, asserts that drug companies put their desires for making money above the well-being of consumers by using a deceptive and unfair marketing campaign to get doctors and patients to use the powerful drugs to treat chronic pain long term, rather than short term as was originally intended.

Mai said it is still being determined how much money the county will seek in damages from the drug manufacturers named in the suit. A 2016 report from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement says 5,725 opioid-related deaths were reported in the state, which is a 35 percent increase over 2015.

Facilities, such as the Transition House and Park Place Behavioral Health Care have seen a major uptick in the number of patients struggling with opioid addiction.

Jim Shanks, CEO/president of Park Place, said many individuals get hooked on opioids after being prescribed pain pills by a physician. After the prescription runs out though, more individuals are transitioning to harder, illegal opioids like heroin and Fentanyl.

“Mixing heroin and Fentanyl can be a deadly combination,” Shanks said. “But people do it because they’re chasing the high they experienced from the presentation pills.”

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