



BOC hears opioid lawsuit pitch

Darryl Welch, The Covington News
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COVINGTON, Ga. – The Newton County Board of Commissioners heard a presentation its Tuesday night meeting from lawyers hoping to get the county to sign on to the ever-growing list of municipalities suing manufacturers of opioids.

According to media reports, Fulton County became the first Georgia county to file suit against opioid manufacturers last month.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, opioids are a class of drugs that include heroin and synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl and pain relievers available by prescription such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, morphine and many others.

The Institute says regular use, even as prescribed by a doctor, can lead to dependence and when misused, can lead to overdose incidents and death.

During a PowerPoint presentation at the Newton County Board of Commissioner's Tuesday night meeting, Shayna Sacks, of the New York law firm Napoli Shkolnik PLLC, told commissioners in 2015 more than 300 million prescriptions were written for opioids.

“That’s more than enough to give every American their own bottle of pills,” she said. “Clearly, these drugs are being pushed into the market-hydrocodone, oxycodone, oxymorphone. These are the popular ones you’ve probably heard of.”

Using numbers available online from agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Drug Enforcement Administration, Sacks said from 1999-2013, 175,000 lives were claimed by opioids, including 16,235 in 2013.

She said overdose deaths have increased in Georgia.

“Let’s talk about Georgia. Unfortunately, Georgia’s death rate has steadily been increasing,” she said. “The problem pretty much covers the whole country, but where it starts is Detroit in Michigan up in the north, heading straight down to Florida through Appalachia to Georgia.

“From 1999 to 2016, our research shows there was a nine-fold increase overall in opioid-related deaths.”

Sacks said the problem spans all ethnicities, races, ages and genders.

“There is always somebody affected,” she said.

Sacks told commissioners prescription opioid abuse costs in the United States are about \$55.7 billion annually.

She said in the 1990s, drug manufacturers began to aggressively market opioids for chronic pain.

“Their marketing representatives said ‘We’ve got to get more people taking opioids. How are we going to do that? We’re going to change the message. We’re going to tell them you can have it for chronic pain,’” she said.

“They went to the doctors and the groups that work with doctors and influenced them to add pain as a new thing to be treated. Not as a symptom, not as something you deal with after something happens to you. Pain is something doctors should pay attention to.”

Sacks said pill mills began popping up around the country and over the next decade, people began to become addicted.

She said big corporations respond to lawsuits. Her firm represents municipalities, counties, states, individuals, unions and other groups.

“Our goal is to litigate in state court so that it’s your judges hearing these cases. So that it’s your jurors listening to the evidence. Some of the cause of actions that we bring are negligence, false advertising, nuisance. With these companies, they just push and push their deceptive marketing.”

Sacks said the negligence challenge comes from statute.

“There are Federal and state statutes that require pharmaceutical companies, manufacturers and distributors to monitor what they are doing, especially when it comes to narcotics.”

Commissioners took no action on the presentation. *The Covington News* is working to learn the extent of any opioid problem in Newton County.

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