

Summit County lawsuit alleges pharma companies pushed dangerous opioids to make a profit

By **McKenzie Romero** @McKenzieRomero

Published: **March 20, 2018 7:12 pm**

COALVILLE — In order to make more money, pharmaceutical companies pushed dangerous, prolonged opioid use on patients with chronic pain, despite knowing the risks for decreased efficiency and increased addiction.

Meanwhile, local governments and service providers, like those in Summit County, have been burdened with the consequences of a nationwide epidemic of drug abuse.

That is the argument behind a massive lawsuit filed in 3rd District Court on Tuesday as Summit County became the first county in the state to sue manufacturers and distributors of opioids over the cost and carnage of addiction among its citizens.

The lawsuit names as defendants 25 individuals and businesses from nine major pharmaceutical companies: Purdue Pharma L.P., Endo Pharmaceuticals, Allergan, Teva, Cephalon, Janssen, AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health and McKesson.

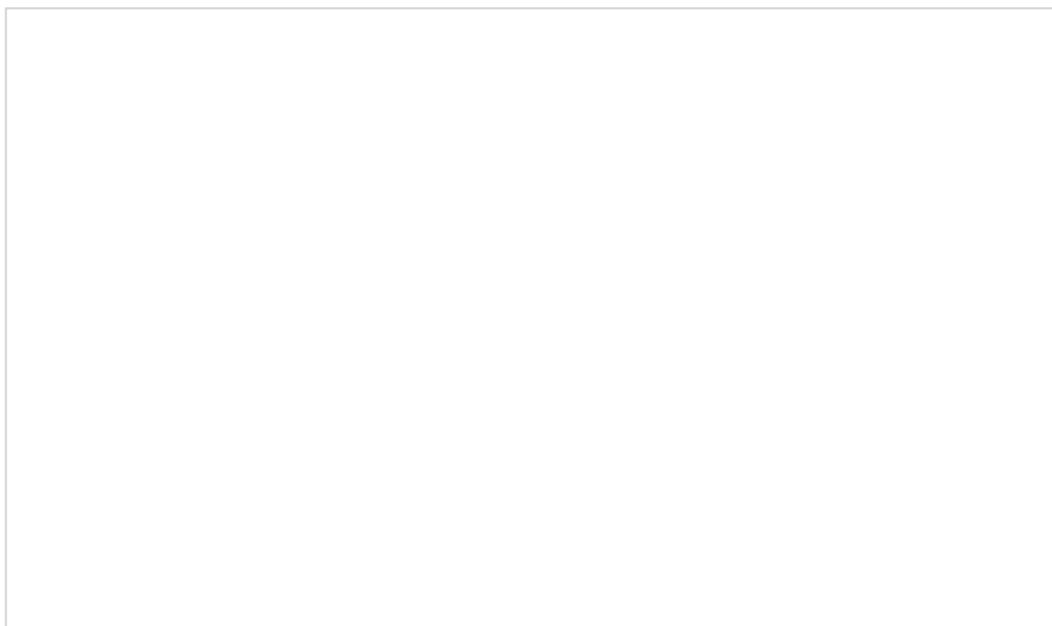
"This case is about one thing: corporate greed. Defendants put their desire for profits above the health, well-being and safety of Summit County residents," the 245-page lawsuit begins.

It goes on to argue that "Summit County has been forced to expend exorbitant amounts of money" fighting the "opioid epidemic" that the companies created through deceptive marketing to the public and misleading sales tactics toward doctors, including local physicians, offering up opioids to treat common aches and pains.

"Defendants, through a sophisticated and highly deceptive and unfair marketing campaign that began in the late 1990s, deepened around 2006, and continues to the present, set out to, and did, reverse the popular and medical understanding of opioids. Chronic opioid therapy — the prescribing of opioids to treat chronic pain long term — is now commonplace," the lawsuit states.

The campaign was "wildly successful," according to the claim, bringing in billions of dollars in revenue each year.

Summit County's lawsuit seeks a jury trial and an unspecified financial award "sufficient to fairly and completely compensate plaintiff for all damages," as well as an injunction ordering the companies to "abate the public nuisance they created."



Sponsored

Trending Articles from Deseretnews

[< Previous](#)[Next >](#)

Summit County Attorney Margaret Olsen announced the lawsuit Tuesday in a press conference at the historic courthouse in Coalville, located at the county seat, saying the litigation comes in conjunction with a "comprehensive public health plan" to address opioid addiction in the area.

In a prepared release prior to the announcement, Olsen emphasized that pharmaceutical companies should be held financially responsible for the cost of the crisis. Those costs over time have included impacts on families like child neglect, infants born with drug dependence, estrangement of relatives, lost careers or criminal charges, according to the release.

In addition to its own attorneys, Summit County has brought on private counsel from law firms Napoli Shkolnik PLLC, of New York City, and Dewsnup King Olsen Worel Havas & Mortensen, and Magleby Cataxinos & Greenwood, both of Salt Lake City. The attorneys are working on a contingency, meaning they would only be paid from any damages the county receives if the lawsuit is successful.

"We are advancing all the costs to pursue this lawsuit," said Collin King, one of the attorneys from Dewsnup King Olsen Worel Havas & Mortensen. "It is a risk we think is worthwhile to take."

King emphasized that Utah is now seventh in the nation for drug overdose events and deaths.

"Utah has seen a 400 percent increase in deaths from prescription opioids over the past five years," King said. "It is a scourge, it is an epidemic, and we intend to do something about it."

Prescription abuse often leads to addiction to illegal narcotics, King said, noting that the opioid crisis has fueled a resurgence of heroin use.

Among the most shocking opioid-related deaths from Summit County were the fatal overdoses of two 13-year-old friends, Ryan Ainsworth and Grant Seaver, who both died over the same weekend after using a synthetic opioid U-47700, nicknamed "Pink." The friends had ordered the drug online from China.

"A lot of these drug-seeking behaviors are driven by addiction, and that causes people to go to places like the mail to try to get drugs when they can't get them from other places," Olson said.

Regarding the young boys' deaths, King said damages from the lawsuit would go to treatment and education services, including for students in the county.

King noted that Napoli Shkolnik is one of the leading law firms taking on opioid related litigation in the country, representing more than 100 counties across the U.S. He expressed his hope that other counties in Utah will join Summit County in taking legal action, and that their combined efforts will ultimately make a difference.

"Every county is having a different rate of incidents, but they are all unacceptably high," King said. "We hope that most every county in Utah joins into this to tell big pharma that Utah takes this serious, and every citizen here wants it stopped."

In a press conference last November, Salt Lake County Mayor Ben McAdams and Salt Lake County District Attorney Sim Gill announced their intent to sue big pharmaceutical companies over the opioid epidemic ravaging the area.

Gill confirmed Tuesday that, as the largest county in the state, Salt Lake is still carefully preparing its case.