

New opioid lawsuit accuses drug companies of 'corporate greed'



Palm Beach County filed a lawsuit Thursday against drug companies that seeks to recoup money it has spent battling the opioid epidemic. (File photo)



By **Skyler Swisher**

APRIL 5, 2018, 6:40 PM

Palm Beach County has joined a growing list of local governments accusing drug makers, distributors and pharmacies of putting profits ahead of the public's health and fueling an opioid epidemic that has cost taxpayers millions of dollars.

“This case is about one thing: corporate greed,” the lawsuit filed Thursday in Palm Beach County Circuit Court states. “Defendants put their desire for profits above the health and well-being of Palm Beach County consumers. “

About 600 people died of **opioid overdoses** in Palm Beach County this past year, making it one of the hardest hit counties in the state.

The 266-page lawsuit names more than two dozen defendants, including big name companies, such as Purdue Pharma, McKesson Corp., Janssen Pharmaceutical, Walgreen Co., Walmart and CVS Health.

The county accuses drug companies of spending hundreds of millions of dollars to develop and distribute scientific and educational materials that misrepresented the risks of opioids, such as OxyContin, fentanyl and Percocet, and co-opting doctors to deliver scripted talks and misleading studies.

Pharmacies and distributors failed to heed red flags of overprescribing and suspicious orders, the suit alleges.

“The thousands of Palm Beach County families struck by this epidemic deserve to hold someone accountable for deceptive, unscrupulous practices involving opioid dispensing, advertising and prescribing,” County Mayor Melissa McKinlay said in a statement. “I am grateful the day has finally come that we are filing suit and saying enough is enough.”

About 200 suits, including ones by **Delray Beach** and **Broward County**, have been filed nationally.

Industry groups have denied wrongdoing. In response to a **lawsuit filed by Osceola County**, Purdue Pharma issued a statement that the company followed all federal guidelines, helped law enforcement gain access to the overdose antidote naloxone and developed three new opioid medications with “abuse-deterrent properties.”

Hundreds of lawsuits from across the country have been **consolidated in federal court**. Unlike other local lawsuits, Palm Beach County’s suit was filed in state court.

Lawyers have promised the county they will recoup the millions of dollars spent battling the opioid crisis. The county is represented by The Ferraro Law Firm, P.A.; Napoli Shkolnik PLLC; and Stull, Stull & Brody.

The lawsuit outlines a variety of damages — overtime expenses for paramedics, drug treatment costs, foster care services for children of people with addiction and a loss of tourism.

Before a crackdown seven years ago, Florida was known as the nation’s pill mill capital, where doctors handed out oxycodone and other powerful painkillers like candy at storefront clinics. In 2010, 98 of the top 100 opioid-prescribing physicians were in Florida, according to the Drug Enforcement Agency.

Now, medical examiners are seeing unprecedented overdose deaths caused by heroin and ultra-potent synthetic versions of the drug.

Palm Beach County — particularly Delray Beach — has emerged as a destination for people seeking recovery from addiction. Recovery homes known as sober homes have popped up in neighborhoods, prompting concerns from neighbors.

Of counties with more than 1 million people, Palm Beach County had the nation’s fourth highest drug overdose rate in 2016, according to an analysis by The Pew Charitable Trust.

sswisher@sunsentinel.com, 561-243-6634 or @SkylerSwisher