

Brunswick Coalition buys billboards to raise prescription abuse awareness

By Sam Hickman

Tuesday, January 12, 2016 at 3:26 pm (Updated: January 12, 7:52 pm)

BOLIVIA — The Brunswick Coalition, which has been established to combat prescription drug abuse, has purchased billboards to create awareness about the potentially deadly consequences of leaving prescription medications unattended.



Photo contributed

The Brunswick Coalition, a group of community leaders working to combat prescription drug abuse and misuse in the county, recently purchased two billboards that will be located on U.S. 17. The billboards' message encourages parents, grandparents and older family members to lock their prescription narcotics securely inside the house. The billboards pictured here will be located at 7270 U.S. 17 South just south of N.C. 87 in Leland and at 2618 Ocean Highway, 0.1 miles south of Royal Oak Road in Shallotte.

The coalition used grant funding to purchase spaces for two billboards, one at 2618 Ocean Highway 0.1 miles south of Royal Oak Road in Shallotte and another at 7270 U.S. 17 just south of N.C. 87 in Leland.

One poster features the eyes of a young woman with an adjacent message that reads, "She gets her hair from her mom. Her eyes from her dad. And her drugs from her grandma's purse."

The billboards are part of a National Family Partnership and Lock Your Meds

campaign designed to reduce prescription drug abuse "by making adults aware that they are the 'unwitting suppliers' of prescription medications being used in unintended ways, especially by young people," according to its website. The campaign includes an array of high-quality advertisements, posters, educational materials, publicity opportunities, interactive games and slide show presentations.

The second billboard features a similar message.

"She gets her hair from her mom. Her eyes from her dad. And her drugs from her parents' kitchen cabinet," it reads, alongside a picture of another female.

Coalition coordinator Tammy Brunelle, of Coastal Horizons in Wilmington, said the billboards will help parents, grandparents and older family members of young people realize the potential dangers in leaving prescription narcotics unattended.

Brunelle's message echoes one of the Project Lazarus slogans, "Prescription medication — take it correctly, store it securely, dispose of it properly and never share."

Project Lazarus is a secular public health nonprofit established in 2008 in response to extremely high drug overdose death rates in Wilkes County, which was four times higher than the state average at the time.

Its founder, Fred Brazon, came to Brunswick County in June 2014 because there has been a significant increase in opioid — or prescription painkiller — poisoning deaths here from 2008 to 2012, according to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2012, Brunswick County had the most prescription opioid overdose deaths — 18 per 100,000 people — in the region, which includes Bladen, Columbus, New Hanover, Pender and Onslow counties.

A billboard message can "go a long way" in creating community awareness, according to Anne Thomas, a former Community Care of North Carolina representative and Brunswick Coalition consultant.

At a recent coalition meeting, Thomas said a prominent member of the community in a separate North Carolina county purchased a billboard with his own money because he had bouts with prescription painkiller addiction.

"You never know who these messages may impact," Thomas said. "And that's a prime example."

Coalition members are also trying to establish a relationship with local churches and Brunswick County Schools to share the message through church bulletins and newsletters students take home to their parents.

"There are several different ways we can go about getting the information out there," Brunelle said at the group's December meeting. "We just have to continue building relationships."

Thomas has worked closely with the Brunswick Coalition, a grassroots group that's "already making strides" in less than two years of existence.

"I think the strength is the caliber of people at the table who invested in making a difference, people committed to working together to make a difference," she said of the Brunswick Coalition. "That's the biggest strength, having resources, commitment, experience, knowledge and expertise. I feel like everyone at the table, their heart is really in it. When you have that, you can do a lot of things. They're all doing it for all the right reasons."

Residents of Brunswick County had 20 unintentional medication and drug overdose deaths in 2014, a rate of 16.8 per 100,000 people. By comparison, the North Carolina average is 9.7 people per 100,000 people, according to figures from N.C. Vital Records and State

Center for Health Statistics

Additionally, 60 people were hospitalized in the county as a result of unintentional medication and drug overdoses in 2013, a rate of 57.6 per 100,000 people, eclipsing the state rate of 41.1 per 100,000 people.

At the coalition's monthly meeting in December, members discussed naloxone distribution and other ways to fight Brunswick County's drug problem.

Robert Childs, executive director of North Carolina's Harm Reduction Coalition, said more than 100 overdoses were reversed in September and October 2014 thanks to the widespread distribution of naloxone, an opiate overdose reversal drug.

In November, the Brunswick County Sheriffs Office became the first agency in southeastern North Carolina to receive naloxone — a synthetic drug that blocks opiate receptors in the brain and reverses the effects of an opioid overdose.

The coalition is in the final stages of securing a \$10,000 Project Lazarus grant for its efforts and in the process of establishing focus groups with four local medical groups: Leland-based Batish Family Medicine, Shallotte-based Varnam Family Wellness Facility, Brunswick County Health Department and Novant Health, coalition director Tammy Brunelle said.

The coalition's mission is to "promote partnerships that utilize a balanced community based approach to increase awareness, accountability and solutions to prescription and other drug misuse," according to its mission statement that was officially adopted at a September meeting.

Brunelle led an effort to secure a \$100,000 Partnership for Success grant, federal money that is distributed by individual states. Partnership for Success grants are only awarded to communities with high drug overdose rates.

As part of the Partnership for Success grant, the coalition must tell the state how it plans to educate the public and use the funds. The billboard purchases were made with PFS grant money.

The coalition also is applying for a \$10,000 grant from the North Carolina Office of Rural Health and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust. In the application, the county must outline how it plans to allocate the money and the coalition must address each of the "spokes" of the Project Lazarus wheel: community education, provider education, diversion and control and harm reduction.

The coalition meets at 3 p.m. Monday, Jan. 25, at Doshier Memorial Hospital in Southport.

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