

Task force tackles opioid epidemic

By Lindsay Kriz

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Leland councilman Mike Callahan speaks to attendees of Tuesday's Brunswick County Opioid Task Force meeting about the need for treatment facilities in regard to opioids in the county. Callahan joined the floor with Brian Ross, E-911, GIS and data base analyst for the Brunswick County Sheriff's Office, who showed mapped data based on opioid-related 911 calls.

Staff Writer

ST. JAMES — Brunswick County Opioid Task Force host and Senior Resident Superior Court Judge Ola Lewis' mission is to get back to a Brunswick County where residents do not see the words "opioid epidemic" in the same sentence ever again.

Lewis was the first of many people to come forward during the latter half of the task force's April 25 meeting at the St. James Community Center and share, with a marker and a large writing pad and easel, their hopes and goals regarding opioid — or prescription painkiller — misuse and abuse.

Lewis initiated the task force to address the specific needs regarding the growing opioid addiction epidemic in Brunswick County.

Several speakers took to the podium to provide information to task force attendees.

Don Flattery, a member of Virginia's Governor's Task Force on Prescription Drug and Heroin Abuse, a board member for Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing and member of the Brunswick County Opioid Task Force, said there will be discussion and planning of a framework for the task force's goals, objectives and strategies.

He said the document must be understandable and measurable, "because if not, it will be a nice thought piece we'll all be proud of and we'll take pictures and it'll go on shelves and collect dust. So

we want something that will be actionable."

Tammy Brunelle with the Brunswick Coalition shared the history of the coalition, which was started two years ago as a response to the growing opioid problem in Brunswick County. The coalition applied for the Project Lazarus grant at that time.

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 was a significant increase in opioid 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.

Brunelle said the coalition did not receive that grant, but successfully secured the Partnership for Success grant, which lasts through December 2018, because Brunswick County is one of the top 10 counties in the state for opioid overdoses.

Brunelle said the coalition has learned much of the emphasis on opioid overdose is placed on heroin, but statistics show two-thirds of opioid overdoses are from prescription drugs, with the remainder as result of heroin use.

She said statistics also show that eight out of 10 heroin users began with other opioid drugs.

"It started somewhere else," she said.

Brunelle shared one last statistic: 67 percent of people who misuse prescription drugs get them from their home or the home of someone they know.

"That's why I believe that statistic is so important: A lot of times, people point fingers and 'The medical profession needs to do something, or law enforcement needs to do something,'" she said. "But when we know 67 percent is coming from home, we need to do something. I need to do something."

To collect information and raise awareness, Brunelle said, the coalition is again working on collecting Needs Assessment data regarding misuse of drugs in the county.

Based on data collected last year, the coalition needed to work on educating the public, including reminders to lock up prescription medications so they are not misused. This includes the distribution of prescription lockboxes and promoting the location of drug drop boxes in the county with seven sites in all.

The coalition is also partnering with the University of North Carolina at Wilmington to put together a survey for local medical providers in the community regarding the North Carolina Controlled Substances Reporting System. This system collects controlled substance prescriptions data within 72 hours of being dispensed and makes this information available to prescribers and dispensers, according to their website.

Brunelle announced the coalition is merging with the task force. "I think this will be a great opportunity to do a lot of good in Brunswick County," she wrote in an email.

Brian Ross, E-911, GIS and data base analyst for the Brunswick County Sheriff's Office, provided visual aids during the meeting in the form of charts that show, thanks to the sheriff's office and Mapquest, a map of 911 calls from January 2015 to April 2017 regarding heroin, Narcan or narcotics in the county. Areas of red were the heaviest areas, with dark blue representing the fewest number of calls.

The data showed the heaviest areas for these types of calls are in Leland, particularly in the Mount Misery Road and Sea Pines Drive area; in the Supply area around Shell Point Road and Oxpen Road; and Calabash and Ocean Isle Beach.

Ross said the data is being used to determine the underlying cause, but it already showed the areas in red are "budding," with a mix of wealthy and needy residents.

He said those studying the data have also been identifying treatment facility locations of any variety, and have found most tend to be along the U.S. 17 corridor which is a convenient location, but not necessarily in the areas where the epidemic is the worst, according to the map.

Leland Town Councilman Michael Callahan said the data show a need for facilities in rural areas. He gave the example of the Link Into New Communities (LINC) Urban Farm in Wilmington, which has a residential re-entry program, a youth development program and a detox center, according to their website.

When it comes to treatment centers, Callahan said, the idea is always to keep families together and to keep people working so they can maintain their jobs. He said data also showed the county needs more transportation solutions to treatment facilities throughout the county.

Amy Olson, a Brunswick County resident with 30 years of nursing experience who also works in consulting, said she's seen firsthand the experiences of drug abuse law enforcement encounters. To address opioid misuse and addiction, she said, it will not only take human solutions and technical solutions.

Those interested in attending the next meeting or who want more information on how to get involved should call judicial assistant Kristin Cranfill at 253-4428 or go to the Brunswick Treatment Courts Facebook page.

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