

Suffolk's headway on opioids

Overdoses down 38% year over year, officials say

BY DAVID M. SCHWARTZ
david.schwartz@newsday.com

A top Suffolk police official told county lawmakers that there has been a sharp drop in opioid overdoses over the past 12 months and echoed “cautious optimism” from the county’s medical examiner and addiction service providers that the opioid epidemic that has ravaged Long Island may have turned a corner.

Through May 27, rates of fatal and nonfatal overdoses dropped 38 percent year over year, Chief of Detectives Jerry Gigante told the Suffolk Health Committee on Thursday.

Before the past 12 months, Suffolk saw about six overdoses a day, one of them fatal. In the past 12 months, the county has averaged about 3.6 overdoses a day, and one death every 36 hours, Gigante said.

If the current rate stays the same this year, there would be

260 opioid deaths in Suffolk County, Gigante said, the same level as in 2015.

The Suffolk medical examiner’s office projects — because testing has not been completed yet — that there were 429 opioid deaths in 2017. That number would be the highest ever. In 2010, there were 141 opioid deaths.

Gigante said 2017 drug overdoses peaked in May, June and July, with total overdoses of 223 in May, 307 in June and 216 in July. In August, the number of overdoses fell to 116. Since then, overdoses have ranged between 84 and 128 a month.

On Memorial Day weekend in 2017, Suffolk had 40 overdoses, nine of which were fatal. Those numbers dropped to 13 overdoses and three fatalities over the three-day weekend this year.

Gigante credited major fentanyl drug busts, aided by technology that allows police to quickly identify clusters of overdoses in real time, along with outreach by nonprofit service groups to overdose victims.

“I’m cautiously optimistic we may have turned the corner. We may see the light,” Gigante



Opioids seized in a Suffolk County bust, 2016. Opioid overdoses in the county are down this year.

38%
Drop in opioid overdoses in Suffolk County

said after the meeting.

Medical Examiner Dr. Michael Caplan also said he was “cautiously optimistic” that the sharp increases in opioid deaths are over. Caplan noted that community outreach, such as naloxone trainings, would continue. Naloxone is the lifesaving drug that reverses opioid overdoses.

“Just because we have good news here does not mean those efforts stop,” he said.

Jeffrey Reynolds, president and CEO of Mineola-based Family and Children’s Association, in a phone interview, agreed that opioid overdose deaths seemed to be dropping. That matches what colleagues across the country have said.

But he warned that Long Island remained in a crisis.

“God knows we can use some hope. But it feels precarious,” Reynolds said.

He said the widespread use and training on how to use naloxone has helped. In addition, groups such as his have expanded outreach to overdose survivors, including peer-to-

peer outreach at hospital emergency rooms.

After opioid-related deaths increased 24 percent from 2014 to 2015 and 40 percent from 2015 to 2016, opioid deaths are projected to increase 19 percent in 2017. The county medical examiner has identified 359 opioid-related deaths in 2017, with another 80 drug cases to be tested.

There are 42 total opioid deaths so far in 2018 through May 1, though another 78 drug overdose deaths are pending.

Health Committee chairman Legis. William Spencer (D-Centerport) called the statistics this year “absolutely amazing” but noted “any death is one too many.”

Last wreckage from 9/11 jet returning to Pa. memorial

The Associated Press

The remaining wreckage of United Flight 93 will be returned this year to the Pennsylvania memorial marking where it crashed in the 9/11 terror attacks, officials said Friday.

The wreckage — stored in shipping containers — will be buried in a restricted area of the park that’s accessible only to loved ones of the victims, said Flight 93 National Memorial Superintendent Stephen Clark.

“Now that we are nearing the completion of the major design components of the memorial,

we are ready to return the remaining wreckage to this hallowed ground to be buried later this year,” Clark said.

The final phase of the memorial, the Tower of Voices, is a 93-foot-tall musical instrument that holds 40 wind chimes, representing the 40 passengers and crew. It will be completed in time for the 17th anniversary of the attacks.

United Flight 93 was en route from Newark, New Jersey, to San Francisco on Sept. 11, 2001, when hijackers seized control. Passengers and crew fought back and the plane crashed into the field in Shanksville, about

60 miles southwest of Pittsburgh.

Gordon Felt, president of the Families of Flight 93, said his group requested a final, thorough examination of the wreckage before it is permanently interred “in order to determine if there were any human remains or identifiable personal items.”

The park service worked with the FBI over a number of months to painstakingly examine the debris.

“We worked with the FBI and on our hands and knees we literally combed through every bit of that wreckage,” Clark said.

Workers found a number of items that will be added to the memorial collection, including an orange passenger call button.

“What that symbolizes is the amazing courage of not only the flight attendants but all the individuals on Flight 93, who took that call to action,” Clark said. “It’s such a powerful symbol of what these men and women did that morning.”

The National Park Service will release a full report of the items collected later this year and how they will be incorporated into the memorial, he said.

“It was important for us to touch everything so we knew, without a doubt, that every possible effort was made to reunite family members with any objects belonging to their loved ones,” said memorial curator Brynn Bender.

Remains of all 40 victims were identified after the crash, either through dental records, DNA or fingerprints, something that helped give a semblance of peace to family members and a way to lay their loved ones to rest, Clark said.

Three caskets of unidentified remains from the crash were buried at the crash site in 2011.