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Opioid overdose deaths rise

By Julian Gill Staff Writer Apr 11, 2018

About 59 opioid prescriptions were filled for every 100 Denton County residents in 2016, a drop from about 76 per 100 residents in 2011, according to Denton County Public Health statistics presented Tuesday to county commissioners.

The number of overdose deaths, however, has been steadily increasing from 25 in 2013 to 37 in 2017, the statistics show.

Denton County Public Health Director Matt Richardson said his office recently started compiling the data because of the national conversation around opioids, which accounted for more than 42,000 deaths nationwide in 2016, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Opioids include prescription painkillers, such as hydrocodone, and tar heroin sold on the street.

Hospitals and pain clinics around the country now are following federal guidelines to curb the number of overdose deaths by exploring non-opioid treatment options. At the state level, the Select Committee on Opioids and Substance Abuse, created in October by House Speaker Joe Straus, is expected to present a concrete plan to deal with the increase in opioid overdose deaths before Nov. 1.

"The fact that Texas is looking at potential legislation coming up in the next legislative session, and the fact that this is a pressing crisis in other parts of the U.S., we wanted to make sure we understood the environment in Denton County," Richardson said after his presentation.

The racial breakdown of opioid-related deaths in the county from 2012 to 2017 shows predominantly white victims. About 87 percent of people who died in that time frame were white. Hispanics, the next highest racial category, comprised 8.1 percent of overdose victims.

In 2016, there were 13.3 opioid-related overdose deaths per 100,000 people in the United States, compared with 4.9 such deaths per 100,000 people at the state level. In Denton County, 4.1 residents per 100,000 people died from an opioid-related overdose in 2016. That figure is lower than 2016 rates in Dallas, Tarrant and Collin counties.

The data show the most deaths occurred in suburban areas of the county, including central and northeast Denton and an area between The Colony and Plano, along the Sam Rayburn Tollway. Richardson said this is significant because the opioid deaths across the country typically occur in more rural areas, especially Kentucky, West Virginia and portions of Tennessee.

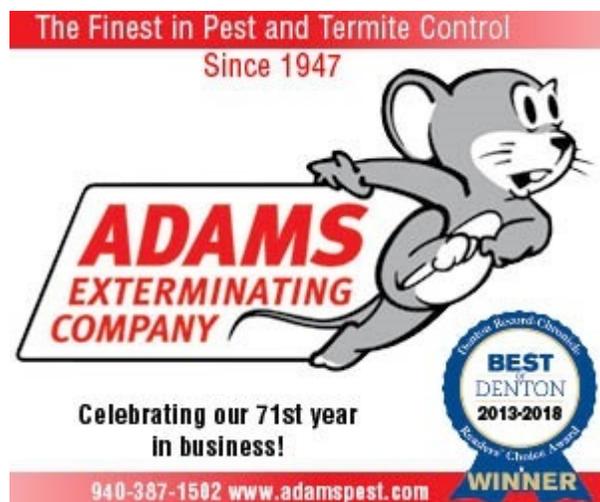
"I'm not sure that in public health or as policymakers there are a lot of conclusions from this, but it's different than what's happening nationally," he said.

Despite declining opioid prescription rates in the county, those local figures remain slightly higher than statewide rates. About 59 opioid prescriptions were filled for every 100 Denton County residents in 2016, compared with about 57 for every 100 people in Texas, according to the data.

Many opioid overdose victims in Denton County retained multiple opioid prescriptions. The median number of prescriptions among people in Denton County who died from an opioid overdose in 2016 was 38. That number dropped to 17 last year, statistics show.

The presentation also pulled data from the Texas Poison Control Network, which tracks exposure to poisonous or toxic chemicals. From 2000 to 2017, the poison control network received reports of intentional opioid exposure among 386 people in Denton County ages 20 to 29, the most of any other age category.

Since 2000, the most common drug for unintentional or intentional exposure was by far hydrocodone, with 918 reports to the poison control network. Richardson emphasized that exposure to opioids among children up to age 5 was a concern. The poison control network received reports of unintentional opioid exposure for 318 children in that age group from 2000 to 2017.



"I think all of this information is potentially useful, but that one seemed to have some clear-cut solutions," Richardson said. "That tells us that there's access for kids to hydrocodone, and we think that can be limited. That's a low-hanging fruit for intervention."

During the Denton County Commissioners Court meeting, Richardson brought up the prevalence of "pharming," in which young people rifle through medicine chests and take pharmaceutical drugs for recreational purposes. Toddlers also can find medication left around the house.

"I think anybody that's had children knows about baby proofing, and yet that curiosity kicks in at the terrible twos and threes," he said. "Kids are amazing in their ability to rifle through stuff that you think you've protected."

Denton police maintain a secure container in the department lobby at 601 E. Hickory St. where anyone can dispose of unused medication 24 hours a day. Department spokesman Shane Kizer said it's an anonymous process, and police aren't patrolling the area for people throwing away illegally obtained prescription medication.

Civilian duty officers at the front desk keep watch over the container. When it's full, officers follow a truck that transports the unused drugs to Houston, where they are incinerated, Kizer said.

Residents also can dispose of old medications during National Prescription Drug Take Back Day from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. April 28. The University of North Texas Police Department will collect unused drugs on campus at Willis Library. Bartonville and Lewisville police also will participate in the effort at their respective headquarters.

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