

"Kill" Your Local Heroin Dealer: Law enforcement responds to recent social media push

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ALTON - Over the weekend, a young woman from the Riverbend area died from what has been speculated to be a heroin overdose. She left behind a son and a family who expressed their love and loss on her Facebook page - which has acted as a sort of memorial wall for mourners following her untimely death.

Also on social media, people are sharing a very provocative sentiment: "Kill Your Local Heroin Dealer." That sentiment for brutal vigilante justice is highly discouraged by law enforcement and will result in possible murder charges if successful and attempted murder or assault charges if not. However, if someone wants to metaphorically "kill" that dealer by taking him or her off the streets in a legal manner, law enforcement is more than happy to assist.

"The best way is to give us the name of the dealer," Alton Police Chief Jason "Jake" Simmons said. "Once we have their names, we have confidential informants who will actually go get heroin from them. The police can't do this by ourselves, and a lot of people out there think all of this is on the shoulders of the police department, but parents need to get involved, find the suppliers, and know where the drugs are from. I don't think of it as 'snitching' if you could save a life. If you know of a heroin dealer out there, tell us what he drives and where he frequents. We need to know these things, and then we could go out there and save his life."

Telling law enforcement is also the advice of Madison County State's Attorney Tom Gibbons, who has been working with various agencies and entities to help attack the heroin epidemic in Madison County with what he described as a "three pronged attack."

"Any time anyone has information about drug transactions, or people who are becoming known to be in distribution of any sort of drugs, law enforcement benefits," Gibbons said. "That's one way people can get involved and take some action without crossing the line and getting themselves harmed or breaking the law themselves. Killing someone is not an answer to deal with this. When they know someone walking down that path to addiction, they should get engaged and get that person help - the earlier the better."

Like plants need water, dealers need customers. Gibbons said two of the main prongs of his attack against the heroin epidemic include depriving the dealers of customers - so their money withers like a plant in a drought, causing them to take themselves out of the scenario. He said Madison County has been treating the heroin epidemic more of a public health crisis than a criminal one under his administration as its chief law enforcement body.

"Stopping demand is the strongest way to affect this, but it's not the only way," Gibbons said. "If you see the three-pronged approach we use - treatment, education and enforcement, you notice enforcement is only one leg of the stool. If someone wants to arrest their way out of the heroin epidemic, you just can't do it. We must cut off demand while attacking suppliers."



Suppliers of heroin in Madison County may face long prison sentences as well. Gibbons said Madison County works with several state and federal agencies to ensure big-time dealers get as long as 15 years in prison. Gibbons said the county has a great working relationship with the U.S. District Attorney's Office from East St. Louis, allowing several heroin cases - especially those resulting in drug-induced homicide - to result in those extensive sentences. Gibbons said people serve as much as 85 percent of their sentences under federal jurisdiction, adding people can get out much earlier through state sentencing.

"We're fortunate to have that connection, we can get 10-15 year sentences, and they will be forced to serve most of that out," Gibbons said.

Both Gibbons and Simmons agreed the problem regarding "local" heroin dealers in the Riverbend is the fact most of them are not "local."

Simmons said many heroin dealers start selling cocaine or marijuana, and add heroin to their selection as the demand increases. He said he is working with emergency room doctors at OSF St. Anthony's Health Center to discover who suppliers of heroin are locally. He said his department may be able to interview overdose patients who are taken to the hospital with heroin still on their person to discover that heroin's source. Simmons said he was pretty sure the answer would be from North St. Louis County.

"We have made quite a few arrests in Alton, but a lot of heroin dealers know not to come to Alton to do it," he said.

Simmons said the majority of heroin in Alton is brought from either North St. Louis County or East St. Louis via the Route 3 corridor. Gibbons said the interstate highway system around Madison County actually sees the same heroin shipments cross twice. Ultimately, the source of heroin in Madison County is Mexico, he said.

"Heroin here comes from Mexico, is transported through the southern states like New Mexico, Arizona and California, and goes right up through Madison County through our interstates, up to Chicago," Gibbons said. "From Chicago, it is sent to St. Louis. It isn't just heroin. Cocaine and meth are also coming up from Mexico. They use the same routes, same couriers and same cartels. Two times those drugs have crossed our interstate highways, which means we have two opportunities to stop them from getting to the streets."

Those opportunities are in the hands of the Illinois State Police (ISP) and federal Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), who Gibbons said are often underutilized and poorly-funded, adding they do not have the resources to properly police those vital corridors as much as is required.

Despite the lack of resources, Gibbons said several "significant busts" have been made in the area, which have hit the Mexican cartels directly in the pocketbooks. He said the county has taken as much as \$1.3 million, which would have otherwise been "muled" back to Mexico.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the more local distributors, Gibbons's hands are a bit tied when it comes to prosecuting them to the fullest extent of the law. He said he is hoping [Senate Bill 639](#) - the "Evan Rushing Law" - will be passed through the Illinois General Assembly after its introduction by Sen. Bill Haine (D-Alton). The law is named after a young Glen Carbon man who died of an overdose. Gibbons said he was unable to charge the dealer with drug-induced homicide, simply because the dealer was located in St. Louis.

"The river is a barrier to us - a legal barrier - which is challenging to overcome," Gibbons said. "We were unable to prosecute that dealer for drug-induced homicide. The bill is intended to amend the law to make it possible for me to prosecute that dealer. It is good for families and victims to get justice."

Gibbons said most dealers in St. Louis are "street-level" dealers who sell many products, not just heroin, for the sole purpose of making money. He said dealers in the Metro East are users selling to other users to help support their habits.

