

Town hall meeting at Alton Memorial Hospital looks at opioid epidemic in Madison County

by Steven Spencer, Staff Writer
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ALTON - Alton Memorial Hospital held a town hall meeting to discuss the opioid crisis in Madison County this past week.

The panel featured presentations from Madison County Coroner, Steve Nonn, Dr. Angela Holbrook, Mike Morrison, Karen Tilashalki and Doug Hulme.

Madison County Coroner, Steve Nonn, started the discussion with alarming statistic regarding overdose-related deaths in the area saying it's not only chilling to see so many in attendance who have lost a loved one due to drug overdoses but also heartwarming to see so many concerned citizens in attendance.

"The United States is in the midst of an opioid epidemic," Nonn said. "One hundred and fifteen people die every day of a drug overdose in this country. Perscription painkillers are being most prescribed in the metro-east and greater St. Louis area in Madison County alone. The per capita use of painkillers in 2015 was 126 pills for every man, woman and child that live in Madison County."

Nonn added that eight people die every two hours in the county due to an overdose and that the heroin coming into the county is also becoming stronger.

"The strength of the heroin that's coming into this area is so high that they can get high through snorting it," Nonn said. "So that image of the alley, the tube around the arm and injecting it isn't there. You can take it and snort it just like cocaine. That's how they're attracting the stuff to kids."

Nonn emphasized how his staff and himself have seen the drug use from the very poor to the very wealthy saying that "everybody is affected by this epidemic."

"It's gut-wrenching to see a parent say 'we knew this day would come,'" he said. "It's like playing Russian roulette, you don't know who you're buying this drug from and you don't know what's in that drug. You think you're buying heroin but you might be buying heroin that's laced with fentanyl, you might be buying heroin that's laced with meth or laced with Xanax. As I tell the kids, there's no Angie's List. You can't call and say this is my local heroin dealer has he delivered any drugs that have killed anybody. One time. One time you can use this drug and you can be dead."

As of February 28th, there have already been 14 drug-related deaths in the area, one from meth, two from heroin, four from fentanyl, two from a combination of fentanyl and meth, four from prescription overdoses and one from cocaine. Last year 85 deaths were reported with 30 due to fentanyl alone. "We're losing people left and right," Nonn added.

Mike Morrison said the issue is certainly a community problem that requires a community response, Nonn agreed that it takes the entire community to make a difference.

Dr. Holbrook, with Alton Memorial Hospital, said efforts are being put in place to combat the issue and help lower the amount of prescriptions that are being given. She added that at least one person comes into the emergency room a shift due to drug overdoses and EMS can see up to three or four a day.

"We have partnered with St. Anthony's Hospital to have the Hospital Opioid Partnership Engagement, HOPE," Holbrook said. "We are meeting on a regular basis to try to come up with a like-minded approach to the problem here in Alton, to try and be doing the same things especially from the standpoint of the emergency departments. We want to decrease our prescribing and we want to send a message out to patients who come in and need narcotic medications for their pain or who are coming in seeking narcotic medications for their addictions. So we're trying to address that issue and make sure we are giving the lowest dose, a very low number of pills and we are truly trying to use that only when it's absolutely necessary. It's a very serious matter to us and we see it all the time."



While local hospitals and doctors are actively working to help with prescriptions, Nonn added that drug dealers are starting to see more repercussions as the epidemic continues to rise.

“We can’t arrest our way out of it but we can’t let them get away with it,” Nonn said. “We treat these deaths as homicides. If you look at an overdose death scene it looks like a homicide scene. We’re going to get search warrants, we’re going to try and get that person’s phone, iPhone, iPad and computer. Why? Who do think the last phone call on the phone is probably going to be to? The dealer, so we need to find that dealer, arrest them and put them in jail. We need to find the person that delivered that drug that caused that death.”

Several of those in attendance spoke on behalf of organizations in the area that offer support for those who are suffering from addiction to help with recovery before they become another statistic.

Jack Wilcox, founder of Just Keep Walking, mentioned the help his organization provides to those suffering from addiction. Greg Gelzinnis, with Drug Free Alton, spoke on their efforts as well as multiple members from Chestnut Health Systems.

For more information on how to seek help or seek help for a loved one visit DrugFreeAlton.com, Just Keep Walking on Facebook, or Chestnut Health Systems at Chestnut.org. Or call Just Keep Walking at 618-407-9879, Chestnut Health at 618-792-0375 or email Drug Free Alton at info@drugfreealton.com.