

Local state lawmakers pushing for sweeping new punishments in Fentanyl-related cases

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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GRANITE CITY – Three members of the Illinois General Assembly spoke at the Granite City City Hall today in order to announce a legislative package hoping to protect first responders from the potent and often deadly effects of the drug, Fentanyl.

Fentanyl is a synthesized opiate, which is currently killing more people in Madison County than heroin, Madison County Coroner Stephen P. Nonn, who was also at the announcement, said. It was found in a Brooklyn, Illinois, night club last month and contact with it sent multiple police and EMTs to area hospitals with side effects of merely coming into contact with the drug. Fentanyl is powerful enough to harm through simple skin contact or inhaling minuscule amounts of it.

Because of that early morning incident, State Rep. Monica Bristow (D-Alton), joined with State Rep. Katie Stuart (D-Collinsville) and Jay Hoffman (D-Highland) to announce new legislation hoping to increase penalties for those using and dealing Fentanyl in cases involving first responders coming into contact with the dangerous opioid.

“Opioid abuse is hurting our entire state, especially our area,” Bristow said. “We're working with law enforcement and educators to help save lives. Two cops and an EMT were exposed to Fentanyl at a Brooklyn night club and had to be treated for it. We owe it to them to grant them more safety while they are doing an already dangerous job.”

Called House Bill (HB) 5942, the bill, which was introduced by Bristow today, would add to the charges incurred by exposing first responders to Fentanyl. According to the synopsis on the Illinois General Assembly's website, HB5942 would do the following:

Provides that a person who unlawfully possesses Fentanyl commits reckless endangerment of a first responder by Fentanyl exposure if he or she, by any means, lawful or unlawful, recklessly performs an act or acts that cause a first responder bodily harm as a result of exposure or contact with Fentanyl. Provides that a person commits reckless endangerment of a first responder by Fentanyl exposure when he or she unlawfully delivers Fentanyl to another that causes bodily harm to a first responder as a result of exposure or contact with that Fentanyl. Reckless endangerment of a first responder by Fentanyl exposure is a Class 2 Felony – effective immediately.

A second bill was also filed by Bristow today in regards to Fentanyl. HB5943 would increase the sentencing enhancement for the following violations involving Fentanyl: manufacture or delivery, possession with intent to manufacture or deliver, a controlled substance, a counterfeit substance or controlled substance analog, controlled substance trafficking, calculated criminal drug conspiracy, criminal drug conspiracy, streetgang drug conspiracy or delivery of a controlled, counterfeit or lookalike substance to a person under 18 years of age.

HB5943 would increase sentencing enhancement for those crimes from three years to six years imprisonment. It would also modify the amount of Fentanyl required to trigger sentencing intervals.

“Throughout the Metro East, we are seeing the opioid epidemic tear apart and hurt families, and put our emergency responders at risk when they come into contact with these dangerous substances,” Stuart said in a release following the announcement. “This legislation helps protect our law enforcement officers and first responders who could be seriously harmed or injured through their service. We need to make sure that our laws are updated to not only address those that are put in harm's way, but also to protect the brave individuals fighting to keep our community safe.”

The measure is backed by several members of local law enforcement, who were at the announcement to grant their support. Madison County Sheriff John Lakin was not able to attend, but Bristow said he gave his full support to the measure. Madison County State's Attorney Tom Gibbons was at the announcement, however, and praised the measure, which was just today filed with the clerk in the Illinois General Assembly.

“Mexican drug cartels are flooding our communities with ever-more dangerous drugs,” he said. “As the up the ante with ever-more dangerous drugs, we have to do the same in kind to meet their force with more force. We're talking about those who choose to do these drugs and those afflicted by addiction putting those first responders in danger, whose lives are now seriously at risk for trying to help.”

Nonn said Fentanyl has replaced heroin in recent years as far as overdose-related deaths in Madison County are concerned. He said as many as 651 people have perished as a direct result of overdose deaths in the last nine years.

In 2013, the first instances of Fentanyl deaths hit the county with only three succumbing to it and 23 dying as a result of heroin. By 2016, however, those numbers had flipped, with 2014 and 2015 having less than 10 Fentanyl-related deaths and many more related to heroin. In 2016, 45 died from Fentanyl-related overdoses and 11 died from heroin.

This year so far, no one in Madison County has died from heroin alone and 31 people have already succumbed to Fentanyl alone or a cocktail of drugs including it.