

THE UNION

February 28, 2017

As a community, we're all in this opioid epidemic together

“Other Voices”

Chief Alex Gammelgard

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

If you, a loved one, or someone you know is struggling with opioid addiction, please reach out to any of the following for help:

Community Recovery Resources (CoRR): 530-273-9541

Western Sierra Medical Clinic: 530-274-9762

Chapa De Indian Health: 530-477-9532

Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital: 530-274-6000

Nevada County Behavioral Health: 530-265-1437

Battling drug trends is an ever-changing target. A decade ago, local police officers faced a different problem than they do today.

Methamphetamine was the drug of choice, and officers consistently found glass meth pipes, white crystalline powders (crystal methamphetamine) and agitated people who were sweating profusely, even in freezing weather.

Over the last several years, the drug trends in our community have changed, shifting towards opioids, echoing trends seen across the nation. Opioid medications such as Vicodin and Oxycontin have been used to treat pain in the United States for decades, but unfortunately misuse of these powerful drugs has become an epidemic. Many patients have become addicted as a result of prescription overuse, and simultaneously a dangerous influx of cheap illegal opioids such as heroin have flooded the streets.

In many cases, users who were addicted to methamphetamine have also shifted to opioid use because of availability. In America, opioid overdose deaths rose to a staggering 33,091 individuals last year, or nearly four deaths per hour.

These alarming trends can seem hopeless, but there is reason for optimism, and there is hard work being done in our community to manage the problem of opioid abuse.

Those deaths, for the most part, were preventable. Here in Nevada County we are not immune to this tragedy.

Opioid addiction is a non-discriminatory condition, affecting all races and socioeconomic classes. Many of us know a story about a high school athlete, family member, or friend with chronic pain, an injury, or a medical procedure that resulted in abuse of their prescribed opioid medications.

These stories hit home, and in the most extreme cases, families are torn apart or lose a loved one due to the dependence on these very powerful drugs.

To combat rising rates of addiction, initial efforts in the country focused on making prescription opioids harder to access. However, the withdrawal symptoms and chemical changes to the brain are so substantial that even the most determined individuals struggle to overcome addiction on their own. Drug dealers have taken advantage of this opportunity by flooding streets with low-cost alternatives such as heroin. There are also synthetic opioids such as Fentanyl and Carfentanil (an elephant tranquilizer) which are much more potent than heroin. These synthetics may be blended into other opioids, and the user has no way to know what constitutes a "safe" dose. In 2016, fentanyl pills disguised as Norco was attributed to a rash of overdose deaths in the Sacramento area.

These alarming trends can seem hopeless, but there is reason for optimism, and there is hard work being done in our community to manage the problem of opioid abuse.

In Nevada County, we have a dedicated team of hardworking community partners that has responded to these trends, and is actively creating solutions. The members of this one-year old Substance Use Disorder Collaborative include: Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital, Community Recovery Resources (CoRR), Western Sierra Medical Clinic, Chapa De Indian Health, Common Goals, Nevada County Behavioral and Public Health, Nevada County Courts, Kmart Pharmacy, 211 Connecting Point, Coalition for a Drug Free Nevada County, Nevada County Sheriff's Office, Nevada City Police Department, Grass Valley Police Department, and non-profits.

Each are doing their part individually and collaboratively to help save lives, support recovery, and protect our community.

The Grass Valley Police Department has and continues to play a critical role in many of these collaborative efforts. Law enforcement, by its very design, is often a "downstream" entity. We respond to calls after an incident has occurred. We take crime reports after a crime has been committed, and so on.

But at GVPD we are looking for ways to be "upstream" catalysts for change; preventing otherwise predictable downstream results.

Our track record for community based policing started years ago. More recently, as part of the Strategic Response Team (SRT) model we work collaboratively with Probation, Nevada City Police, and Nevada County Behavioral Health and many other service providers and government organizations to address mental health concerns in our community before they become a crisis. Through this effort, we hope to move a little farther upstream as it relates to crisis mental health care, proactively finding solutions for individuals in the community. In addition, we partner with the Coalition for a Drug Free Nevada County to hold community drug take-back days as well as provide safe disposal sites throughout the city in an effort to reduce drug abuse of unused prescription medications.

One of the most tragic downstream opiate related impacts we respond to as police officers is overdose and frequently we are the first on scene.

Last summer, GVPD partnered with Dr. Christina Lasich of Western Sierra Medical Clinic and Medical Director of CoRR, and SNMH Ambulance Manager Rob Riley to supply police officers with Naloxone, an opioid reversal drug. Officers are now trained to use Naloxone, which immediately reverses the effects of opioid overdose when given promptly.

We became the first police agency in the Sierra Sacramento Valley area to take this step.

Already, officer-carried naloxone kits have saved two patients who overdosed. Although our hope would be that we never have to use Naloxone, we recognize our role as guardians of human life, whether on the street or strategizing solutions in a conference room.

As a community, we are in this together. If you, a loved one, or someone you know is struggling with opioid addiction, please feel free to reach out to me or any of the service providers mentioned in this article.

Alex Gammelgard is the chief of police for the Grass Valley Police Department.