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By Liz Kellar

Grass Valley cops now carrying OD reversal drug

In Nevada County, overdose deaths have more than doubled since 2009.

That sobering statistic mirrors a nationwide epidemic; since 2000, the rate of deaths from drug overdoses has increased 137 percent, including a 200 percent increase in the rate of overdose deaths involving opioids (opioid pain relievers and heroin). Data collected in 2014 demonstrates a 15-year increase in overdose deaths involving prescription opioid pain relievers and a recent surge in illicit opioid overdose deaths, driven largely by heroin.

To put that into perspective, according to the CDC, there were approximately one and a half times more drug overdose deaths in the United States in 2014 than deaths from motor vehicle crashes.

In May alone, Nevada County saw a number of deaths due to suspected opioid overdoses, including one at the county jail.

Now, thanks to a pilot program proposed by a coalition of community and law enforcement agencies and health providers, every Grass Valley Police officer has been trained to administer naloxone — which is used to counter act effects of an opioid overdose — and will carry it with them on patrol.

“As a law enforcement first responder, I’ve encountered situations where the opioid overdose patient lived, as well as situations where they did not. I’m excited to have another lifesaving tool to offer.” Grass Valley Police Officer Zack LaFerriere.

“The number of ODs in our community has been noticeable, the increase has been noticeable,” said Grass Valley Police Chief Alex Gammelgard. “In the last few years, we have seen a stark increase in the amount of opiates on the street. A decade ago, we saw a lot of methamphetamine. Now, that has changed to opiate-based illicit drugs like heroin, your classic street drug. We also see Vicodin, Dilaudid, Oxycontin, and Fentanyl, although as those have become more difficult to obtain, local law enforcement is seeing more heroin.”

The pilot program is the brainchild of a substance use disorder coalition that includes Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital and Western Sierra Medical Clinic, Nevada County public health and behavioral health departments, local judges, law enforcement and community service providers, Gammelgard said.

Every officer on the Grass Valley Police force went through training on Aug. 18, on how to recognize an overdose, when it is appropriate to administer naloxone and how to administer the nasal inhalant.

“There is no negative effect, even if the person is not under the influence,” Gammelgard said. “But the effects of naloxone last about 30 minutes — it’s not a permanent reversal of symptoms.”

All officers will carry naloxone in their patrol vehicles and will respond to dispatch calls of potential overdoses if they are able to.

“They can be on the scene faster than an ambulance or paramedics, in some cases ... because they are mobile and on patrol rather than responding from a fixed location,” Gammelgard said. “In cases of opiate overdose, every second counts.”

Most 911 calls regarding overdoses get transferred as medical calls, he noted. Grass Valley Police officers received 36 calls for service for overdoses in 2015. They are on pace for a similar number this year, with 25 calls so far.

Being able to be more proactive in those cases is a positive step forward, officers say.

“As a law enforcement first responder, I’ve encountered situations where the opioid overdose patient lived, as well as situations where they did not,” said Officer Zack LaFerriere. “I’m excited to have another lifesaving tool to offer.”

See this story online to learn more about naloxone.

To contact City Editor Liz Kellar, email lkellar@theunion.com or call 530-477-4229.

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For more information on what to do in an event of a drug overdose:

<http://harmreduction.org/issues/overdose-prevention/overview/overdose-basics/recognizing-opioid-overdose/>

For more information on naloxone:

<http://harmreduction.org/issues/overdose-prevention/overview/overdose-basics/responding-to-opioid-overdose/administer-naloxone/>