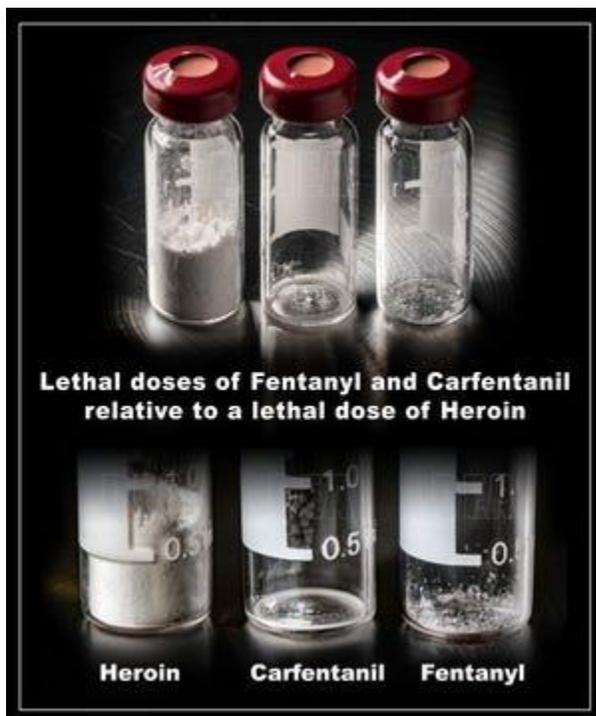


In one job, Dr. Dean DePerro sees a lot of death.

In another, he tries to prevent it.

The Portage County coroner is also medical director of Townhall II, a major provider of drug addiction treatment in the county and DePerro says what he is witnessing as coroner is a rise in drug overdose fatalities, as well as suicides, that makes that other job all the more critical.

“Unfortunately, the numbers are climbing again,” he said, adding, “I think the logical assumption is that as people are having more difficult times in their lives, they turn to things like suicide and drugs in order to try and ameliorate those issues. And I think we’ve been through some very difficult times over the last several years and certainly this year.”



DePerro said that as of Monday, there were 42 confirmed fatal overdoses in the county in 2020, plus two cases that are suspected overdoses but pending toxicology test results. In addition, there were 26 suicides in the county last year. For fatal overdoses, 2020 was the third worst year the county has had, behind 2016 with 47 and 2017 with 45 and it follows two relatively down years, 2018 with 30 and 2019 with 33.

The number of suicides was the third worst, at least since 2000. Only 2018 with 31 and 2010 with 28 topped 2020. There were 25 in 2016 and 24 in 2019. DePerro said there may be a connection between overdoses and suicide.

“These are desperate times for desperate people,” he said.

Karyn Kravetz, associate director of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Portage County, said fatal overdose victims last year were a mix of both males and females and ranged in age between 18 and 86.

“Ten years ago, we maybe used to have a dozen [fatal overdoses], but of course, then the opioid epidemic hit,” she said.

From 2000 through 2012, the worst year was 2009 with 16 deaths and 2000 and 2008 lows of just five. But then in 2013, they suddenly jumped to 22 deaths from 15 the previous year and then to 27 in 2014 and 30 in 2015.

Opioids are a class of drugs that include some prescription pain medications, as well as the illicit heroin and the particularly potent fentanyl and carfentanil. Narcan, a drug now commonly carried by paramedics and police officers, has proven to be a boon in reversing the effects of these drugs and saving lives.

But Kravetz said there is now a disturbing new trend, with more fatal overdoses involving non-opioid drugs that Narcan is ineffective against.

“The thing that I noticed these past couple of years, which is concerning, is it’s not only fentanyl,” she said. “At first it was heroin, heroin mixed with fentanyl, sometimes just fentanyl. Now we’re seeing more on the reports of people who had meth and coke in their systems, sometimes combined with fentanyl and sometimes they died from cocaine and methamphetamine overdose without the fentanyl.”

DePerro said, “A combination of illicit drugs seems to be becoming more prevalent as we are seeing these overdoses.”

And what the county is seeing is not unique, not only in a rise in overdose deaths following a drop for a couple of years, but also in an increase in non-opioid drugs in fatal overdoses.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report last September, “Deaths co-involving cocaine and [illicitly manufactured fentanyl], and involving psychostimulants with abuse potential (e.g., methamphetamine) with and without opioids have driven recent increases in stimulant-involved overdose deaths.”

DePerro said that kind of change in trends often forces those on the front lines of fighting drug addiction and overdoses to play “whack-a-mole.”

“It’s like the designer drugs that are out there right now,” he said. “Change a molecule and we may not find it in a toxicology report. When carfentanil came on board, that’s

the elephant tranquilizer, a few snowflake size pieces of that can kill you. We didn't know what it was."

He said this has made responding to drug overdoses dangerous, especially early on.

"Now you can walk into a room where there's aerosolized carfentanil and die and that's happened in the country where first responders die."

## **Help is available**

"We need to direct more resources towards treatment," said DePerro.

DePerro said Townhall II uses a proven medication-based treatment that basically uses one opioid that is more "predictable" to wean the patient off another one over time and then wean them off the medication.

"It keeps people alive," he said. "When I see people in my clinic, I tell them that the first goal is not to get them off the narcotics, it's to get them off the street. Because it's about harm reduction and if we can get them off the street and get them onto a medication that can be controlled and measured and verified and then we can help them solve that problem first and then help them with their other issues."

Kravetz said treatment available includes detoxification, residential treatment, counseling, and recovery housing.

"We always want to make people realize that treatment is available," said Kravetz.

Other initiatives include a recovery outreach team, composed of Streetsboro firefighter Jim Bucks and Joe Follen, a Town Hall II peer support specialist, who visit the homes of people who have survived overdoses around the county after they have been referred by police departments.

"Those two, they went out I think at least maybe 20 to 25 calls last year, knocking on doors," said Kravetz.

There is also Project Dawn, she said, which provides free Narcan kits and the education needed to use them. Appointments are necessary. Call Townhall II's business line at 330-678-3006 or the Portage County Health District at 330-296-9919.

DePerro said it is difficult for him to say how many clients there are in treatment through Townhall II because the numbers fluctuate, but he estimates there are currently nearly 50. But by at least one estimate, however, that could just be a small fraction of the number who may need help. According to an Ohio Coroners Association calculation, said DePerro, for every person who has fatally overdosed,

there are 40 who overdosed and survived and 400 using drugs whether they have overdosed or not.

“I don’t know how they came up with those numbers to be honest, but they’re scary numbers,” he said.

If you are in need of help, visit <https://www.townhall2.com> for more information about Townhall II, which is located at 155 N. Water St. in Kent. The 24/7 Helpline is 330-678-4357 (HELP). Or text “4hope” to 741 741.

*Reporter Jeff Saunders can be reached at [jsaunders@recordpub.com](mailto:jsaunders@recordpub.com).*