

Overdose Deaths on the Rise in Dutchess. Here's Why and How the County is Combatting It

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Brandon Hildwein was six months into his recovery when COVID-19 became a pandemic.

The treatment he was receiving through the Lexington Center for Recovery methadone program was working. He no longer felt the need to carry heroin in his pocket. For around a month, that had been his backup plan, in case he started to feel his life spiral out of control.

That's exactly what happened for many when the isolating effect of the pandemic began to set in.

Being clean, Hildwein, who is living in Poughkeepsie, knew he could reach out to his counselor or family in those

moments of isolation in which he did question his recovery.

"I learned how to cope with stuff (before the pandemic started), like being able to talk about my triggers, and not just try to isolate and deal on my own," the 30-year-old said.

In the last four months, however, Hildwein has lost two childhood friends to overdoses. Both, he said, had been cut off from the support of their families, leaving them alone with the urges and voices that can be heard in quiet moments of loneliness.

The number of overdose deaths in Dutchess County increased by more than 50% in the first half of this year, a resurgence of a crisis that statistically improved through 2019.

Jean-Marie Niebuhr, the head of Dutchess County's Opioid Task Force, said both the pandemic and bail reform each played a role, but she is reluctant to blame any one factor for the spike because there isn't data to support such a claim.

What Niebuhr is confident in saying is that drugs are getting more deadly with the presence of fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid painkiller.

"The data indicates that the extremely potent and deadly drug fentanyl continues to be present in the individuals who have died of an overdose. Fentanyl has been shown to be in the drug supply of street drugs across New York, including in cocaine," said Niebuhr, the director of coordinated services for Dutchess County Department of Behavioral and Community Health.

From January to June of this year 49 people died from opioid-related overdoses in Dutchess, compared with 32 and 35 during the same time frames in 2019 and 2018, respectively, according to the county health department.

Of those 49 deaths, 28 were attributed to fentanyl, and another 15 were from heroin mixed with fentanyl.

The span comes after a 2019 year in which the number of overdose deaths, and emergency room visits and hospitalizations due to overdoses, all declined in the county.

But, the problem is also not Dutchess' alone. Last month, Ulster County announced a public health emergency after citing 34 deaths related to fentanyl through the end of July. From January through July, opioid-related deaths in the county increased by 171% over the same period in 2019.

Orange County last month announced it had seen 95 opioid-involved deaths as of Sept. 2, a 25% increase over 2019; the county saw 97 such deaths in all of 2019.

For most of the region, the spike represents a return to a 2018 year in which most counties in the mid-Hudson Valley were among the state's leaders in overdose deaths and emergency room visits per capita.

During the second quarter of this year, during a time in which much of the state was shut down and access to treatment services were limited, Dutchess saw 26 overdose deaths. There were 25 such deaths in the quarter in 2018 and 20 during last year's second quarter.

And, March and April of this year saw more overdose-related 911 calls to the county, 50 and 61, respectively, than in those months any other year from 2016-2019. Those totals do not represent the high for any month in that span, though.

In response, county leaders say they have reallocated resources and instituted assistance programs, such as outreach into homeless shelters and places in which drug use is known.

The spike followed a concerted effort by the county to combat the drug epidemic, including spending millions to open its 24-hour stabilization center, which offers walk-in help for drug addiction and mental illness. But, many of those in-person services were suspended during the pandemic and since reopening the center has seen a decline in individuals seeking assistance.

Conversely, the Dutchess County Opioid Treatment Program at the Lexington Center, the only methadone program in the county, has seen a 50% increase in the number of intakes and 15% increase in walk-ins since virus restrictions began.

"It's not like they are aggressive or have psychiatric issues, nothing like that. They're just ordinary people who unfortunately fell upon opioid use and just want help," said Alma DeRosa, opioid treatment program director at the Lexington Center for Recovery.

The setback comes following optimism among leaders to begin the year, and as a new drug has entered the market that may be even more deadly.

The problem with Fentanyl

In February, County Executive Marc Molinaro spoke about the progress Dutchess was making in its battle against opioid abuse. The number of people dying had dropped significantly, from 84 in 2018 to 63 last year, according to county totals.

"For the first time in years, we can see a slight and distant glimmer of light, over the horizon, just out of reach," Molinaro said in his State of the County address.

But that hope was short-lived as the number of overdose deaths began to rise over the next few months. The prevalence of opioid abuse is hard to pin down because the numbers are under reported, officials say. The main metric used is overdose deaths, which some say doesn't account for the bigger picture of how many people are using and why.

Dutchess County law enforcement and the district attorney's office would not characterize the quantity of opioids that come into the county, or if they have seen any changes in that pipeline since the pandemic started.

While more are dying, there may not be more who are using. Fentanyl is part of the reason for that.

Experts say when the drug is mixed with any opioid or even cocaine it can be fatal, especially for people with a low tolerance, such as new users and those who were recently in treatment. Though its responsibility for death is statistically on the rise locally, fentanyl has been an issue along the East Coast for some time.

"If you have even the tiniest little bit of fentanyl in your cocaine, it will kill you because you have zero tolerance to it. It would be like a toddler drinking a bottle of vodka," Niebuhr said.

Last year, 22 of 39 people who died from an overdose in the first half of the year in Dutchess had presence of fentanyl in their systems. That number jumped 28 of 37 in the second half of 2019 and 43 out of 49 the first six months of 2020.

The second quarter of this year saw 11 overdose deaths attributed to the combination of cocaine and fentanyl, specifically, the most of any quarter counted by the county in at least four years.

The 49 overdose deaths in the county represented the most for the first-half of the year for the past five years of statistics supplied by the county. In 2018, the county saw 41 deaths in the first six months and 52 in the second six; in 2017 it saw 87 total deaths with 36 in the first half of the year.

Niebuhr noted that another opioid synthetic has recently entered the drug pipeline in New York. The Drug Enforcement Administration describes carfentanil as "10,0000 times more potent than morphine and 100 times more potent than fentanyl."

Finding treatment in jail

While bail reform enabled many who would otherwise be in jail walk free while awaiting trial for non-violent offenses such as drug possession, officials also say it eliminated one way in which those in need could get help.

The drop in overdose numbers been 2018 and 2019 has been attributed to, in part, a "system wide change" that gave those in jail access to treatment.

Niebuhr credits a "massive community push towards medication-assisted treatment" that provided individuals in jail and also in the community with access to methadone and suboxone, which helps alleviate withdrawal symptoms.

Since 2019, people who entered the Dutchess jail system that were already undergoing medically assisted treatment have had their treatment maintained. And, as of Oct. 1, the jail began providing access to medically assisted treatment to those entering the jail with opioid addiction.

Individuals most susceptible to overdosing are those who have a low tolerance, such as new users or people who were on the road to recovery but relapsed. In the past, individuals who were incarcerated would go through forced abstinence from the drug only to go back on it when released.

However, with bail reform, individuals who might otherwise have received treatment through the jail system are put back on the streets.

"We used to have the luxury of engaging people in treatment after they had been detained, but since people are being sent away with only an appearance ticket, it is more difficult to access them," said Niebuhr.

Help hard to find

The shutdown curtailed access to addiction services in many cases, and advocates say many stopped seeking help out of concern for their safety.

Without support, other factors will influence an addict, said Dr. Elinore F. McCance-Katz, assistant secretary for mental health and substance use for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

"When the scales have tipped toward dealers, you're going to have more people using dangerous drugs and having very unfortunate outcome," she said, adding that, on a national level, they have seen reductions in the number of people who "meet the criteria for opioid use disorder."

"I don't think it's a matter of the more people using or the drug is getting deadly... it's the stress that people feel, the risk for relapse that puts people out and the inability to access treatment," McCance-Katz said.

She pointed out opioids are frequently used as a "coping mechanism" especially now, as people seek relief from stress and anxiety. Those suffering withdrawal may find it difficult to receive the counseling online or over the phone.

The Dutchess County Stabilization Center stopped in-person visits in March and transferred all services to over the telephone. The center, which connects individuals to treatment centers, has seen a reduction in the number of clients since then.

Some clients also stopped attending support group meetings and many left group settings for the safety of their own homes. Mental Health America of Dutchess County saw a decline in the number of occupied rooms within their residential housing during the beginning of the pandemic, but said that people have been coming back.

The number of individuals in Dutchess County seeking treatment for opioids, including heroin, had dropped 10% in the last two years, from 2,683 in 2018 to 2,403 in 2019, according to the state.

Andrew O'Grady, CEO of Mental Health America, which also includes the Mid-Hudson Addiction Recovery Centers, said he thinks the decline is because people are still fearful of coming into group settings such as emergency rooms and intake centers.

"Projecting out, we expect to have about 75% of what we had last year. Our numbers for heroin and opioid addiction compared to 2019 are slightly above what we saw then," O'Grady said.

In the absence of support groups, friends and family are still available for assistance for some struggling with addiction, but not all. And, not all are in a mental place to reach out for that help.

Hildwein saw it in his friends who died during the shutdown.

"They just stopped talking, stopped working the program and just started handling things themselves and then come to find out they relapsed and they were using again," he said. "A couple of them who were close to me, they (overdosed) and now they're gone."

Bringing the numbers down

County officials don't know how long it will take to bring the number of overdoses down again, or what the future holds if there is another shutdown or if carfentanil permeates into drug market within Dutchess.

"These unprecedented times have only further complicated the opioid crisis," Molinaro said in a statement. "Undaunted, the county has responded by engaging those with substance use issues with new, inventive services and programs to reach these residents and offer these proven life-saving methods."

Dutchess, in announcing the spike in cases through the first six months of the year Monday, also announced strategies it is taking, or plans to take, to combat the drug crisis in addition to existing services like the Stabilization Center and 24/7 helpline.

The county is placing recovery coaches in homeless shelters in known places of drug use. Every Saturday, these coaches engage with high-risk populations within the City of Poughkeepsie to provide individuals with "harm reduction strategies" such as fentanyl testing and naloxone distribution.

The health department is also working with the county's Department of Community and Family Services and Hudson River Housing to provide group support at the Dutchess County Jail's housing PODS, which are serving as homeless shelters.

And, the county is providing naloxone training to businesses located on Main Street in Poughkeepsie. This is in addition to a planned pilot program in which opioid emergency kits will be locked and installed in various places throughout the city.

Recovering in a pandemic



Hildwein, 30, had been using heroin for a little over a decade when a friend made an appointment for him at the Lexington Center.

"At the time, I was closing at McDonald's and I was tired of having to go to work and always having to figure out (how to get heroin) before work. There was always this constant chaos," Hildwein recalled of that day in August 2019.

"I bought heroin and then would keep it on me (while I was in treatment), just in case. And honestly, before then, I would never have had dope in my pocket that was not being sold or being used," he said of how he was able to overcome the addiction. He did that for about a month.

Methadone is a medication used to treat withdrawal symptoms and cravings caused by opioids. Some clients will stay on the medication for decades to stave off the cravings.

The Lexington Clinic has around 500 clients and is expecting to expand to about 800 in the next six months, depending on community need, DeRosa said. The methadone program has been open throughout most of the pandemic.

DeRosa believes the increase in participants means more people are seeking treatment, not necessarily that more people may be using opioids. The majority of the program's clients are white males between the ages of 21 and 30 years old, but the clinic does see people from all backgrounds and financial situations.

About 70% of the Lexington Center methadone program's clients are opting to take their medication at home instead of at the clinic, where they have access to counselors and medical staff. Clients can choose to come into the clinic for counseling or talk over the phone.

For Hildwein, who has been talking to his counselor over the phone during the pandemic, having someone in a safe space to talk is equally as important as getting the medication.

"Sitting on the phone and talking to (my counselor), sometimes it's actually better because I get to talk a little bit longer," he said. He is staying at a residential recovery house in Poughkeepsie, which only allows him to leave the house for a certain number of hours. Because he does his counseling online, he can spend more time with family.

However, for others, who may be less stable, sitting at home or in front of screen for prolonged periods of time is not ideal for recovery.

"Isolation and being alone is a big factor for overdose and for suicides, what we call 'deaths of despair,' Niebuhr said. "So, anytime people are isolated from family and friends and the things that keep socially connected, people are at higher risk."

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