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Drug Overdoses and Deaths in Clarkstown are Down, Here is Why

The drug crisis is both complicated and insidious and has been growing exponentially for the past twenty years. Every year the number of deaths and overdoses rise across the country and locally despite the best efforts to combat the issue. However, despite these facts we have some reason for hope as half year statistics locally demonstrate that both overdoses and deaths are down significantly for the first half of this year. First let's get to the facts of the matter and then look at some reason why we are seeing stats that buck the trend.

According to the latest monthly statistics released by the Rockland County Crime Analysis Center total drug overdoses countywide are down year over year by 43%. Even more importantly, deaths from overdoses are down by 26% year over year. In Clarkstown the numbers are even more impressive. In Clarkstown overdoses are down 50% and deaths from overdoses are down 45%!

This is a significant reduction, so the question remains why the drop in total overdoses and deaths within Clarkstown and Rockland County? In discussing this matter with our police and crime analysis center staff we see several factors at play. These include a return to normalcy post COVID, stepped up education and enforcement, as well as more importantly new and renewed partnerships that includes peer counselor outreach for follow up once an overdose occurs. Let's briefly look at each individually.

First and foremost the numbers illustrate just how damaging COVID and the resulting lockdowns have been for people. This is clearly demonstrated by the rise in calls for service to the police for people in emotional distress. In 2020 there were just over 500 calls for service to the Clarkstown Police involving a person in emotional distress. This number was itself a rise of 15% over 2019 and an additional rise occurred of nearly 20% in 2021. Thus, over the two main COVID years where shut downs were in largely effect and people were more isolated the emotional trauma was evident and pronounced. However, now in a largely "post COVID era" the calls for service involving persons in emotional distress through the first half of 2022 are static and on pace with 2021 numbers. So while the baseline is 35% higher today as opposed to 2019, it is not rising this year. This is reflecting that with fewer people shut in has improved the overall feeling of well-being folks are experiencing.

The next factor is education and enforcement. It is clear that the word is getting out about how deadly the fentanyl crisis it is and impacting all illicit drugs. It is nearly impossible to turn on the television news, pick up a newspaper or check out social media and not hear a story about drugs laced with fentanyl leading to deaths. Similarly, we have done more outreach and education via our own social media and in schools through our school resource (SRO's) and DARE officers to warn about the dangers of fentanyl laced drugs and this is likely having an impact. This coupled

with a really enhanced enforcement strategy, led by our drug task force and street crimes unit in targeting dealers is also having some effect. I am most grateful to our Rockland County District Attorney Tom Walsh and his team who is leading the way in this area with our police—it is working and putting a dent into the problem.

However, the thing I am most proud of is the strengthened and new partnerships we have undertaken to bring peer counselors and mental health professionals to respond to the crisis. Earlier this year we organized a conference call with a college classmate of mine Denis Romero who is now the regional administrator for SAMSHA a federal agency that serves people affected by drugs and mental health issues. The call involved Rockland County District Attorney Thomas Walsh, myself, Chief Jeff Wanamaker and his team from the Clarkstown Police and several other stakeholders. We discussed best practices and what is working across the country. It was my intent to seek funding to hire mental health and substance abuse counselors to respond through the police department to try to assist those who have experienced an overdose and offer them a pathway to get treatment. The clearest message we heard on that call and the subsequent follow up calls is the high degree of success in recovery when a peer counselor is connected to a person who survives an overdose as soon as possible. The numbers are startling higher when that contact happens very close to the overdose, either on scene or while in the hospital. A specially trained and certified peer counselor, namely a person who has experienced the same issues and is now in recovery, is the one person best equipped to reach somebody who has experienced an overdose and hopefully get them to consider treatment.

Following that series of calls and meetings we took a different path and signed an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with the Rockland Council on Alcoholism and Other Drug Dependence (RCADD) to provide peers to connect with everyone who experiences an overdose in Clarkstown. This is an important pilot program, the first of its kind in Rockland County and the numbers seem to be proving its worth. The reductions in deaths and total overdoses are significantly above average in Clarkstown and begs the question, why, what has changed? Most especially the reduction of deaths from overdoses is dramatic. What has changed is the laser focused target to assist in getting people to consider treatment by the outreach of certified peer counselor. Undoubtedly several people are alive today who perhaps would not have been if not for the effectiveness of the outreach commenced through this program which has led to treatment.

The outreach also includes the expanded use of our community police program to reach the homeless as well as those who have had an overdose. This is in addition to the existing outreach of the Rockland County Department of Mental Health who also perform follow up has been effective. Taken together we are seeing for the first time a reduction in the numbers of total overdoses and deaths. This is an area we are leading on and frankly perhaps the most important work I have been involved with as your Town Supervisor. We promised to do something, and the initial results are indeed promising. We will update you further as the month's progress but so far education, enforcement and most importantly targeted outreach seem to be having a positive

effect right here in our community. Thank you to all who have assisted in this endeavor especially our District Attorney Tom Walsh, the Clarkstown Police Department under the leadership of Chief Wanamaker, RCADD and the Rockland County Department of Mental Health and all who have worked to seek a pathway to treatment for those afflicted with the scourge of drug dependence.