

Somerset police to address opioid addiction

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SOMERSET — When police officers are out there in the community doing their jobs, they see people struggling with drug addiction, with the most recent trend being the opioid crisis.

Somerset Police Chief George McNeil thinks his officers may be able to get these people started on the path to recovery from addiction and so he has announced that his department has joined the Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative (P.A.A.R.I.) to launch an addiction outreach and recovery program.

"Initially, we want to reach out to people with information, tell them where to go and show we're here to help them, not arrest them," Chief McNeil said.

The Somerset Police Department will begin its program on March 1 and will be following the Arlington Outreach Initiative model. As part of the initiative, trained clinicians will reach out to people known to suffer from addiction living in the community, support them in developing a plan to facilitate long-term recovery and direct them and their loved ones to related services and support groups.

"It's not as much of a problem as it is in cities, like Taunton or Fall River," Chief McNeil said when asked about the extent of opioid addiction in Somerset. "But it's not something we want to be reactive to. We want to be proactive, so that it does not become an extremely big problem that we can't keep up with."

Police departments who are part of P.A.A.R.I. encourage opioid drug users to seek recovery, help distribute life saving opioid blocking drugs to prevent and treat overdoses, connect addicts with treatment programs and facilities and

provide resources to other police departments and communities that want to do more to fight the opioid addiction epidemic.

"We're the first responders," Chief McNeil said. "We're probably the most aware of the problem because we're out there dealing with these people on a daily basis more than anybody else is."

Chief McNeil said a representative of the program Learn to Cope, which helps people with drug addictions, came to the Somerset Police Department last week and could help the department with the initiative.

As part of P.A.A.R.I., the Somerset Police Department will work to reduce the stigma associated with addiction, the number of opiate overdoses in the community and the amount of incidents where doctors over prescribe opiates to patients. The department will expand access to nasal naloxone (Narcan) to train police, those suffering from addiction and their loved ones on how to administer dosages to reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. The department will add to the number of local addiction treatment options and resources (inpatient and outpatient) for residents. The department will also work to increase local access to medication/pharmaceutical assisted treatment for opiate addiction, empower and motivate families by providing data-driven strategies aimed at problem solving toward successful recoveries and offer more community prescription drug take back days and mobilize drug take back assets to senior/public housing neighborhoods.

The Somerset Police Department recently installed a medication disposal box in the lobby of the police station.

Chief McNeil said Lieutenant Jay Borges will work with him to administer the P.A.A.R.I. at the Police Department.

Chief McNeil said a medical director at Charlton Memorial Hospital will have to sign off on Somerset police officers carrying Narcan and Somerset Fire Chief Scott Jepson will teach officers how to use it. Chief McNeil said it will be voluntary for officers to carry Narcan. He said he will be writing a policy on the department's use of it.

The Arlington Outreach Initiative was created by Arlington Police Chief Frederick Ryan and is inspired by the Gloucester Police Department ANGEL Initiative, created by Gloucester Police Chief Leonard Campanello. They started the initiative to bridge the gap between the police department and the opioid addicts seeking recovery. Those two police chiefs founded P.A.A.R.I. and will work with the Somerset department to further their initiative. Chief

Ryan has reached out to Chief McNeil to offer information and support as the community implements the Arlington model.

Chief McNeil said Gloucester has taken some giant steps in having an impact on opioid problems in its community. He said Arlington is more comparable to Somerset and so his department will use that model to reach out to people who have addiction. He said officers who know people who are suffering from addiction can reach out to them to direct them to long term recovery programs and services that could help or when the Police Department gets 911 calls related to addiction, they can identify those that need help from that information and offer assistance. Chief McNeil said this type of work done under the initiative will help to get rid of the stigma that people may have with the opioid problem.

"It's a disease and it's a public health crisis right now, so we have to get around that," Chief McNeil said.

Chief McNeil said the Police Department could have a place where opioid addicts could sit down to talk with counselors who can give them direction and resources to help them and not stigmatize them.

Chief McNeil said people should also know the Good Samaritan Law which allows someone who may be sharing drugs with someone else to call to get help for that other person if he or she is having a problem and not be subject to arrest. He said that person could be saving someone's life by calling the police.

"If we can relieve them of that fear, they won't be afraid to call," Chief McNeil said.

As of Feb. 11, 64 police departments, sheriff's offices and other law enforcement agencies in 19 states have joined with P.A.A.R.I. to create and launch their own programs and initiatives aimed at attacking drugs from the demand side, rather than just the supply. Chief McNeil said his department is not receiving grant money to implement the initiative.

"If you save one life, that's huge," Chief McNeil said.