

Heroin epidemic exacts a savage toll in Massachusetts town



PLYMOUTH, Mass. —Fire Chief G. Edward Bradley carries Narcan, the drug that reverses heroin overdoses, nearly everywhere he goes around this sprawling town. Even to the Little League field when he watches T-ball games.

It's part of a personal mission, gnawing and never-ending, that Bradley sees as the greatest challenge of his long career.

"You see all the alarms around town for the nuclear plant we have here. I wish we had one for heroin," Bradley said last week.

Plymouth counted 15 drug-related deaths last year and 313 overdoses, a total 50 percent greater than Taunton's, a city of similar size that once had been considered the face of the drug epidemic.

This year, Plymouth is on track to smash its own grim record. By Saturday, the town had recorded 136 overdoses- an average of exactly one a day -and 10 related deaths.

It's a tally that has risen so quickly, so stunningly, that many Plymouth leaders did not realize the town had an opioid crisis until it overwhelmed them. That includes Police Chief Michael Botieri.

"It took time for me to become a believer in this epidemic," Botieri said. Now, nearly everyone believes.

"It's not getting any better, obviously," Bradley said. "We realized we're as bad as some of the biggest cities in the state, if not worse."

Plymouth's per-capita overdose rate is significantly higher than hard-hit Worcester's, a

city three times its size that saw a 59 percent rise in overdoses last year.

While the numbers grow, so has Plymouth's response.

A task force has been formed, a new squad of plainclothes police has made more than 200 drug arrests in the last six months, and the local hospital is making drug-abuse prevention and treatment a critical priority.

"There is no solution to this unless everybody works together," Bradley said. "Don't be afraid. Don't hide. Jump up and down and scream."

The task force is meeting regularly and draws together officials from the schools, courthouse, district attorney's office, Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital-Plymouth, legislators, Town Hall, clergy, and the YMCA.

Plymouth officials cannot yet document that the effort is bearing fruit, in terms of fewer overdoses and deaths, but officials say progress has begun. Leaders from all levels of government- and residents, too -are talking with each other about the drug crisis in ways they never had before.

Information is shared, and strategies are taking shape.

"Sometimes I think I spend more time with these people than I do with my doctors and my medical staff, and that's because it's such a huge social issue," said Peter Holden, president of Beth Israel Deaconess in Plymouth. "It's been an amazing evolution, and it's been in some regard a terrible eye-opener."

The hospital is bringing social workers and behavioral health specialists into the emergency room to help addicts in crisis find a path to treatment and sobriety. And Holden has shown a wake-up video about opioid use, produced by Plymouth North High School students, to the board of trustees of the Massachusetts Hospital Association, which he leads as chairman.

Since then, the Plymouth video has been shown to nearly 1,000 hospital executives around the country.

At home, the battle received a resounding boost when Town Meeting voted last year to hire seven police officers to focus on drug and street crimes. Police Sergeant Chris Butler, an Army veteran of the 82d Airborne Division, volunteered for the group.

"It was a real opportunity to give this a try and make a difference," Butler said.

The plainclothes unit was an easy sell, said Town Manager Melissa Arrighi. Every time Plymouth's department heads meet, the latest overdose numbers are a jolting reminder of the need for action, she said.

"It's been absolutely devastating to me," the school district's superintendent, Gary Maestas, said. "It's devastating when I walk down a sidewalk in our community and see a syringe on the sidewalk. My heart skips a beat."

The opioid crisis has swept through cities and towns all across Massachusetts, accounting for more than 1,000 deaths last year, state officials said. The crisis does not discriminate, but finding a reason for Plymouth's uncommon level of suffering has been elusive.

"Why here? I have absolutely no answer for you," Arrighi said.

The overdoses occur at all times of day in Plymouth, in neighborhoods throughout the town's 134 square miles, and across income levels.

In December, a motorist stopped abruptly at Fire Department headquarters to drop off an unconscious 32-year-old man who had overdosed on heroin. The driver sped away, and his companion survived.

In January, an overdose prompted a 911 call from a distraught girl who found her grandmother unconscious in the home.

The 56-year-old woman, who was revived by a Fire Department crew, had been caring for the girl and her 9-year-old brother.

Some townspeople blame drug dealers from Boston and Providence for the heroin epidemic; others suspect the influence of addicted transients.

Bob and Bonnie Sullivan, who live near the Cape Cod Canal, have devastating firsthand knowledge of the crisis, which affected all four of their sons, now ranging in age from 23 to 29. They went from alcohol to marijuana, and then painkillers to heroin; opioid addiction has ravaged their household.

When their sons were in the drug's grip, they stole thousands of dollars from the home. Jewelry and tools, too. One son overdosed in the room above the kitchen, Bob Sullivan recalled while fingering the kind of Narcan syringe he used to save him.

The owner of a used-car dealership, Sullivan estimated that he and his wife have spent more than \$100,000 on treatment for the boys. Three of them are clean now, and the fourth is navigating his way through the court system.

"I would wake up every single morning thinking, 'What next?'" Sullivan said. "But regardless of the problems we have, we are so lucky that our kids are alive."

Sullivan said he knows of 20 young people in Plymouth who have died of overdoses.

With every death, officials here are reminded that the fight will be long- perhaps decades long, perhaps generations. They insist they are committed.

"For me, it's kind of personal," Bradley, the fire chief, said while driving through the town. "I have six grandchildren

By BRIAN MACQUARRIE