

Valley law enforcement agencies grapple with heroin resurgence

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Marijuana isn't always the "gateway drug" that leads to hard-core substance addiction. For some, it doesn't begin to compare with what's right there in the medicine cabinet.

"Prescription drugs are one of the things that get kids hooked" and lead them to begin abusing heroin, said Naperville police Detective Shaun Ferguson. "When they realize they can pay much less for heroin than for prescription drugs, they turn to heroin."

The affordability and accessibility of heroin — a drug often glamorized by their peers — has led to a resurgence in its popularity among young people, according to Ferguson and other area law enforcement officials. That resurgence, in turn, too often ends in death or otherwise ruined lives.

Naperville and Aurora police and the sheriff's offices in DuPage, Kane, Kendall and Will counties do not, as a rule, keep track of heroin-related crimes and incidents separate from their overall "controlled substance" statistics.

But after doing a bit of research, Ferguson — who works in his department's Special Operations Group — concluded of all drug-related arrests made between 2009 and this year in Naperville, approximately 34 percent involved heroin. That included 24 heroin-related arrests in 2009, 33 in 2010 and 28 so far this year.

Prescription drug-related crimes are also on the rise from past years, Ferguson said, going from 13 such arrests in 2009 to 34 in 2010 and 18 to date this year.

Lt. Brian Olsen, of the Aurora Police Department's Special Operations Group, said police responded 55 times in 2010 to incidents involving heroin, and have done so 52 times thus far this year. Those numbers reflect ambulance calls, overdoses and suicides as well as criminal matters, Olsen said.

Deputy Craig French, spokesman for Kendall County Sheriff Richard A. Randall, said that agency is “seeing more heroin-related calls,” although he could not provide percentages or statistics. French echoed Ferguson’s and Olsen’s sentiments, saying the resurgence “is due to the increased availability of heroin in the Chicago area and (its) reduced cost.”

Kane County Sheriff Patrick Perez added that, unlike other drugs, heroin “can be snorted rather than injected, making detection by parents or family members more difficult.”

“There is also a misconception by first-time users that they will not become addicted if they snort heroin rather than inject it,” Perez said. “It does not matter how heroin is ingested: The person using it will become addicted.”

Just last summer, Elgin was the scene of one of the biggest heroin busts in years. It was 9:45 on a Monday morning in July when Kane County Deputy Sheriff Ron Hain noticed a Dodge Dakota pickup that failed to use a turn signal on Dundee Avenue after exiting from I-90.

Behind the wheel was a 41-year-old Mexican-American woman named Claudia Chagoya. She admitted she had no driver’s license. But something else — maybe the Texas license plates, maybe the way she behaved — set off more alarm bells in Hain’s mind. Searching under the truck, he noticed some unusual-looking bolts and tool marks on the driveshaft. Investigators drilled into the shaft and out came a stream of brown powder. They eventually found 15 pounds of heroin hidden inside.

Prosecutors believe Chagoya was hired to drive the truck from near El Paso, Texas, after it returned with another driver from a three-day trip to Mexico. Chagoya reportedly admitted to officers that she had been hired to drive to a hotel in Chicago and turn over the truck to someone who would answer her phone call. Instead, she landed in the Kane County jail, facing up to 120 years in prison if convicted of drug-trafficking charges.

But by and large, according to the head of the Elgin Police Department’s drug unit, heroin has not become as big a problem in the Elgin area as it may be in Aurora and Naperville.

“We’re not seeing any big uptick in heroin,” Sgt. Rich Ciganek said. “We get a couple arrests every year, but no more or no less this year. Except for that big county bust last summer, the heroin we find here is batched in small amounts, for personal use.”

No local agency to date has developed a heroin-specific seminar or presentation for the public.

French said Kendall County officers conduct annual drug and alcohol abuse prevention programs for first, third and fifth graders at the eight elementary schools in unincorporated areas of the county. Olsen said school resource officers do likewise in Aurora.

Perez said his officers “have been getting the word out for the past four years with a group known as The Hearts of Hope, a nonprofit group of parents whose children have suffered from addiction, and some who have died of drug overdoses.” Lea Minalga is director of that Geneva-based organization.

Ferguson said while Naperville police have yet to conduct a heroin-centric public education seminar, such a presentation could be in the offing.

“Now that heroin is a regional problem, people are coming to us and asking ‘what do we look at’ and ‘what are police doing about this,’” Ferguson said.

“And the public is really stepping up and giving us a lot more information than they have in the past” about suspected heroin-related activity and issues in their neighborhoods, he added.

In Will County, Executive Larry Walsh, State’s Attorney James Glasgow, Sheriff Paul Kaupas and Coroner Patrick O’Neil have joined forces to develop the Heroin Education Leads to Preventative Solutions program, or HELPS. It aims to discourage young people from ever trying heroin.

The U.S. Department of Justice recently awarded the Will County Drug Court \$200,000 to provide resources for the treatment and rehabilitation of heroin addicts.

Established in 1999, the drug court has helped more than 250 participants re-integrate themselves into society.

Drug court participants plead guilty to the crimes of which they are accused, but all charges are dismissed upon completion of the program.

Graduation requirements mandate participants remain drug-free, submit to random drug testing, secure employment, follow through with treatment and attend weekly counseling sessions.