Is life saving Narcan a double-edged sword in heroin epidemic?

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CHEEKTOWAGA, N.Y. (WKBW) - It is a sad reality we see far too often. On Wednesday, 7 Eyewitness News camera captured a life or death situation, as a heroin addict was revived outside of Cheektowaga Town Court.

Nobody doubts that Narcan has saved countless lives in western New York. However, is this life-saving drug a double-edged sword? That is a question experts face from many in the community.

Kayla D'Angelo, a 23-year-old recovering heroin addict, knows the importance of Narcan all too well.

"My life was a really dark place when I was using heroin," D'Angelo told 7 Eyewitness News. "Everyday that was the only thing that mattered."

"I have been Narcaned a dozen times," D'Angelo explained.

For D'Angelo, those 12 near-death experiences were scary. However, they were not enough of a shock to get her sober. D'Angelo's rock bottom came after she lost a place to live and "all material possession."

D'Angelo is very aware of the Narcan controversy. And while many, like her, the idea of needing Narcan is scary, for some addicts it has become a double-edged sword.

"That would be sort of a safety net if they were to overdose and no one was around to come to their aid immediately," D'Angelo explained.

That is a trend Cheektowaga Police have started to notice.

The department is on track to respond to 13 times the number of heroin overdoses as two years ago. Officers in the town responded to 26 overdoses in all of 2014. So far in 2016, police officers there have responded to 57 overdoses, and administered Narcan 42 times.

"Cases where we got to a home where somebody's overdose and there's a Narcan kit in there. We have several cases where somebody's administered it themselves or somebody in there administered it," said Assistant Chief Jim Speyer.

However, Speyer says that a much bigger problem is fentanyl. Despite warnings that many do not know the deadly additive is in heroin, addicts are now looking for it.

"The insanity of addiction is that you seek out the things that are most dangerous just for the fact of it being stronger," D'Angelo explained.

Experts also say after Narcan, there is not enough help for addicts.

"The real question is, after Narcan is administered, what happens?" said Nicholas Gazzoli, the Director of Horizon Village. "Is treatment introduced or do people just go back out and use?"

D'Angelo, Speyer and Gazzoli, all believe even if some may be taking advantage of the drug, saving somebody's child is always a priority.

"We'll keep administering Narcan as long as it keeps saving lives," Speyer said.

D'Angelo said her journey would have ended a long time ago if it was not for Narcan. Since becoming sober less than four months ago, she has become a representative for those struggling with addiction, rebuilt a relationship with her parents and even met with lawmakers about ways state funding can help battle the epidemic.

"I am extremely grateful to be sitting here," D'Angelo said. "I believe that there is hope for my future and I have a purpose to live by."

For help, you can call:

- Crisis Services of Erie County (716-834-3131)
- Niagara County Crisis Hotline (716-285-3515)
- Regional Action Phone in Genesee County (585-343-1212)
- Horizon Health Services (716-831-1800)
- OASAS HOPEline (877-846-7369)
- Mid-Erie Counseling & Treatment Services (716-895-6700)
- Catholic Health Pathways (716-862-1565)
- Spectrum Human Services (1-800-466-2040)
- ECMC Inpatient and Outpatient Treatment Services (716-898-3415)
- Horizon Village Terrace House (716-854-2444)
- Alcohol & Drug Dependency Services (854-2997)
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs - Substance Abuse Services (716-862-8565)
- CiteHealth (716-848-2000)
- Lake Shore Behavioral Health, Inc. (716-884-0888)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (1-800-662-HELP)
- Beacon Center (716-831-1937)
- Catholic Charities Outpatient Clinic (716-835-9745)

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