



# Lancaster Bee

2018-04-26 / Front Page

## Speakers share perspectives, progress at Maryvale opioid forum

by BRYAN JACKSON Cheektowaga Editor

Erie County's aggressive tactics to combat opioid abuse in the past couple of years seem to be paying off, but more cooperation and information are still needed to continue to stem the tide, according to officials from across the health, law enforcement, political and educational landscape gathered at Maryvale High School last week.

"If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community, a state and a nation to combat this awful epidemic," Assemblywoman Monica Wallace said during her opening remarks on April 19 at Maryvale's William E. Fichtner Performing Arts Center.

"We all must participate in this battle," said Wallace, who hosted the event. "It's too big for one of us to fight alone ... and in order to win this battle, we have to arm ourselves with information."

Information and statistics were plentiful at the forum, which drew a couple of dozen attendees. According to Erie County Commissioner of Health Dr. Gale Burstein, total overdose deaths, which are largely caused by opioids, climbed nationally by about 13 percent and statewide by around 6 percent. However, in Erie County, those numbers are finally heading down.

"We have taken a huge initiative to do a great amount of work, and we're actually being able to bend the curve," Burstein said. "So, we believe when all the overdose deaths ... are confirmed, that we'll have at least about a 20 percent reduction in the number of opioid-related overdose deaths in 2017 compared to 2016."

Burstein credited communication and partnerships between community groups and government agencies for helping turn the tide.

Ongoing projects such as decreasing opioid prescriptions by health care providers, the county's Opiate Epidemic Task Force and police-peer responses after overdoses — an approach pioneered by the Cheektowaga Police Department that follows up with overdose victims the next day — are in place to continue the positive progress.

In Cheektowaga in 2015, police responded to 127 overdose calls, which resulted in 12 deaths. In 2016, those number jumped to 167 calls and 16 deaths before falling to 113 calls and 10 deaths in 2017.

Police Lt. Brian Gould said those deaths, as well as responding to the same addresses over and over, frustrated the officers and precipitated their approach.

"We were upset. We didn't get it," Gould said. "We saw how it was affecting our community, but we didn't understand why people were continuing to do this. Why were people continuing to die? How could somebody

who just watched a loved one overdose from drugs, an hour later use the same drugs and be in the same position? It really came down to education and using our leadership in the community to try to make a difference.”

So far, the department’s police peer program with the county Health Department has been a success, Gould said. The Health Department receives every overdose police report from Cheektowaga; then a peer specialist and an officer visit the address to provide addiction and recovery services, even finding ways to get people into treatment the same day.

The timing of the visit is critical, Gould said. Go too soon after an overdose and the help being offered might not sink in, but wait a couple of days and the person is probably back using drugs to stave off the debilitating effects of withdrawal.

“That next morning is when we need to get you, and that’s what our program is doing,” Gould said, adding that the success rate is between 40 and 50 percent.

The final speaker was Christine Adamczyk, a Cheektowaga councilwoman whose son, Daniel, battled addiction and died of an overdose in 2017. Adamczyk’s son was a member of the opiate task force, and after hearing strangers tell her Daniel helped them avoid that fatal dose, she was driven to make sure people suffering with addiction and their families know that help is there.

“It makes me happy that he helped other people when they were in need. When they were drowning and wanting to hurt themselves with the drugs, my son was there to help them,” she said. “So I say, when you are down and out, there is help out there, and if you ever need anything, reach out because there are people out there.”

Other speakers included Maryvale Superintendent Joseph D’Angelo and Lori Brown, a certified prevention specialist with WNY United Against Drug and Alcohol Abuse. The organization and the district started a program at the beginning of the school year in which Brown teaches students in grades kindergarten through sixth grade skills to avoid substance abuse.

In addition to the presentations and question-and-answer segment, attendees could receive free training in naloxone nasal spray, known by its brand name, Narcan, which is used to block the effects of an opioid overdose.

If residents want to dispose of drugs — prescription and illicit — they can use the Cheektowaga Police Department’s 24-hour-a-day drug drop-off box, at headquarters, 3223 Union Road, or to find a different medication and needle drop-off location, visit the Health Department’s opioid information page at [www2.erie.gov/health](http://www2.erie.gov/health).

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