

Overdose Response Initiative targets dealers of deadly drugs

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From left to right: Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Adler, Chautauqua County District Attorney Patrick Swanson and U.S. Attorney James Kennedy.

Chautauqua County District Attorney Patrick Swanson and U.S. Attorney James P. Kennedy, Jr. recently announced the creation of the Overdose Response Initiative (ORI). Modeled after

similar initiatives across the state and country, this program aims to examine overdose deaths in an effort to track down drug dealers and offer support to victims' relatives.

The Overdose Response Initiative aims to coordinate local law enforcement and compile information from a multitude of sources to find the origin of the drugs that lead to overdoses.

"We then will work with our federal partners, including the US Attorney's Office and the FBI, to put these cases together for federal prosecution," Swanson stated. "Until now, the partnership has been an informal one, however, today, we are formalizing that partnership and making public our efforts to combat overdose deaths."

The partnership announcement follows a training session, organized by Swanson and presented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Adler, the Opioid Coordinator for the U.S. Attorney's Office. Over 40 investigators and top level administrators from law enforcement agencies across Chautauqua County attended the training hosted by SUNY Fredonia and its new Campus Police Chief Brent Isaacson. Swanson said, "The level of participation today is a testament to the commitment by our law enforcement leaders to fight this problem in our community."

Defendants who sell drugs that lead to an overdose death can be charged federally and face up to life in prison if convicted. For example, in November 2018, in a first of its kind verdict, a federal jury convicted Dontrell Wise of supplying the drugs that led to November 2017 death of a young Cheektowaga woman. Wise was sentenced in March of this year to life in prison. The prosecution resulted from the combined efforts of the FBI, DEA, Buffalo Police, and Cheektowaga Police. DA Swanson offered, "Collaboration at that level is what is needed to bring these peddlers of poison to justice." Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Adler handled the prosecution of that case.

The initiative's multistep, multi-agency approach, begins when an overdose occurs. Overdoses are being investigated like crime scenes. Investigating officers will work with the newly appointed Chautauqua County Narcotics Prosecutor to collect facts concerning the time, place and identity of the deceased and whether or not there is evidence of value at the scene.

Another critical component is the cooperation of family and friends of the deceased. Investigators will interview those closest to the victim in hopes of discovering the source of the fatal drugs.

All of this information, along with a toxicology analysis, will be compiled and relayed to the District Attorney's Office, which will then develop a prosecution strategy in conjunction with the US Attorney's Office.

"I commend District Attorney Swanson for his proactive leadership in seeking to address the

opioid crisis in Chautauqua County and the greater Southern Tier region,” stated U.S. Attorney Kennedy. “We know that in areas where public health and public safety come together, death rates are reduced and communities make positive strides in the opioid battle. The residents of Chautauqua County should be encouraged by this new collaborative partnership. However, let this also serve as a warning to those peddling these deadly drugs that we are one team and we will find you and prosecute you.”

Swanson further stated, “We are able to take these steps because our U.S. Attorney, James P. Kennedy, Jr. is committed to holding those who deal drugs accountable for the havoc they wreak. This is also possible in part because of an additional attorney being added to my staff. With the right resources we are able to accomplish more. One of my current priorities is to request the funds for an investigator to work side-by-side with my narcotic prosecutor. I am eager to give these cases the attention they deserve. Our citizens are dying and it needs to stop. This initiative is a much needed response to a tragic crisis that is gripping Chautauqua County and destroying countless lives throughout the county.”

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