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Chatham County Leaders Convened to Take Aim at Opioid Addiction

PITTSBORO, NC – Chatham County Sheriff Mike Roberson and Chatham Health Director Layton Long convened more than 75 leaders across the county as part of a Chatham Opioid Prevention Leadership Summit on Dec. 4, 2017 in Pittsboro. The Sheriff's Prevention Partnership on Controlled Substances played the key role in planning and hosting the summit and will bring lessons learned from the summit into its future work.

Nidhi Sachdeva from the NC Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) reported that four people die in North Carolina every day from drug overdoses, which now exceeds death by motor vehicles. While Chatham County's opioid issues are not as dramatic as much of the state, reports show that it is clearly on the rise.

Participants and speakers represented a broad spectrum of organizations and individuals, including: elected local officials, law enforcement, court system, school system, advocacy groups, nonprofits, parent groups, social services, public health, emergency responders, Chatham Hospital, state agencies, treatment and recovery services and many others.

"Overall, this summit was one of the most successful events like this that I have ever attended. I realized today that we all still have more to learn about how such drugs get into the community and the schools and how much work is needed to stop this nationwide epidemic," said Health Director Layton Long.

Sheriff Roberson said, "We are so grateful to see how many people showed up to focus on such a critical issue affecting far too many people. I especially thank the families and individuals who shared their heart-breaking tragedies and success stories. They are our inspiration to prevent further tragedies due to addictive substances."

Chatham families who have lost teens to substance abuse issues offered valuable lessons learned and urged action on several fronts, especially related to drug abuse among teenagers, including:

- Increase programs like Chatham 360 that promote treatment and help young people avoid court records and school suspensions for minor offenses.
- Promote open dialogues with students and parents about drug abuse, including recognizing an overdose.
- "Don't run. Call 911." Educate everyone about the state's Good Samaritan Law that allows a person to call 911 for a friend or family member without getting themselves into trouble.
- Make sure people recognize the dangers of non-opioid prescriptions, such as Xanax and Klonopin, which are also addictive and potentially deadly.

Candace Green, a former Chatham resident, described the horrors of drug addiction that put her on a dangerous and painful path. "I am here today with a story of hope thanks to people here who did not give up on me." She especially credits Chatham 360, led by Renita Foxx, for turning her life around.

During the event, Dr. Richard Pavelock from Evans-Blount Total Access Care in Greensboro noted that the epidemic took off in 2000 when prescriptions for opioid pain meds increased dramatically. "It leveled off a bit in 2012, but now headed back up again."

Pavelock noted that many people hooked on opioids will switch to heroin, which is much cheaper. He noted that 60% of heroin users were initially addicted to opioids. "It affects people of all ages, races and income levels."

Narcan (also called Naloxone) is one of the few substances that can reverse an opioid overdose, but is not as widely available in many communities. Legislation has made it easier for pharmacies to give Narcan to people without prescriptions, but not all pharmacies are stocking it and some people are fearful of asking pharmacists.

Chatham's EMS provider, First Health, reported 77 calls related to overdoses in 2016, including several where Narcan was given to reverse the overdose.

Staff Sergeant Ronnie Miller reported that Chatham County specifically is seeing an increase in heroin availability, including heroin laced with a stronger opioid, such as fentanyl. Some is even laced with carfentanil, a synthetic opioid 10,000 times stronger than morphine.

Just getting a bit of carfentanil on the skin can cause a major overdose, which presents a danger to emergency responders exposed to it. Most of the illegal synthetics are being made overseas and smuggled into the United States.

Jennie Kristiansen, director of Chatham County Social Services (DSS), said that a recent survey of social workers showed that 84 percent of them believe the county is very affected by substance abuse. "The majority of foster child cases involve parents with addition issues. This becomes a serious barrier to the foster child being able to go back home."

Chatham DSS is emphasizing trauma screening for children to identify potential issues, such as drug abuse in the home and its impact on their emotional state.

District Court Judge Sherrill T. Murrell reported similar court impacts. "Drugs show up nearly every aspect of the courtroom, including divorces, child custody cases, petty crimes, and abuse situations. Some are testing positive for more than one drug."

Chatham County Schools works closely with groups like Drug Free Chatham to help young people suspected of drug use. Staff said making parents aware of the dangers of their kids have access to their medicines and alcohol is a critical issue.

Sachdeva from DHHS said that major North Carolina trends include increased use of Narcan to stop overdoses and making sure hospitals are checking infants for drug withdrawals, which can be deadly. She advocated for more widespread access to needle exchanges to prevent the spread of such diseases as hepatitis C among drug users.

Chatham Hospital is working with physicians to advocate for less reliance on opioids for patient pain issues. Keith Stinson, nursing director, said that recent studies show that larger doses of Tylenol can be just as effective as many opioids to control pain.

The event ended with small groups discussing their ideas for steps that could help the county successfully combat substance abuse. These ideas will be focus of the Sheriff's Prevention Partnership on Controlled Substances as it considers next steps for Chatham County.

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