

Software helps Collier deputies track heroin overdoses to prevent more

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(Photo: Spencer Platt, Getty Images)

As an opioid epidemic tightens its grip on towns, cities, counties and states across the country, the Collier County Sheriff's Office is turning to tech to try to stem the tide locally and prevent the rise of heroin overdoses.

Earlier this year, the law enforcement agency started using software developed by federal officials to track fatal and non-fatal heroin overdoses in Collier and create a real-time hot-spot map that shows first responders where the drug overdoses are occurring.

The Overdose Detection Mapping Application Program was created under the auspices of the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas program, a federal measure designed to provide resources to federal, state, local, and tribal agencies to coordinate activities to address drug trafficking in specific areas of the country.

More: [Florida man arrested in Collier on cocaine, heroin trafficking charges \(/story/news/crime/2017/07/11/florida-man-arrested-collier-cocaine-heroin-trafficking-charges/469022001/\)](#)

Nationwide, more than 145 agencies currently use the mapping program, but in Florida the Sheriff's Office was the first.

"If we can't see it, we can't stop it," Sheriff Kevin Rambosk said. "So if we don't know what is occurring in our own community, there's no way we can try and prevent it from occurring.

"You can either stay out in front of a potential problem or you can come back and clean it up later. And our thought is always prevention."

(Story continues below graphic.)

DRUG OVERDOSES CAUSED MORE DEATHS IN 2015 THAN FIREARMS OR VEHICLE CRASHES

Firearm deaths



Vehicle crash deaths



Drug overdose deaths



¹ - estimate

SOURCE National Safety Council and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



The program allows deputies to upload information from a suspected drug overdose to a database, using a computer or mobile device. The information then populates the electronic map with color-coded dots that show where the person overdosed, whether the overdose was lethal and whether Narcan, a drug used to revive people, was administered.

In analyzing the data, the Sheriff's Office and other first responders will be able to figure out where resources need to be allocated, Rambosk said.

Not only would the map show what areas are in need of Narcan to treat people who overdose, Rambosk said, but it also would help deputies spot trends faster — such as tainted drugs flooding certain areas.

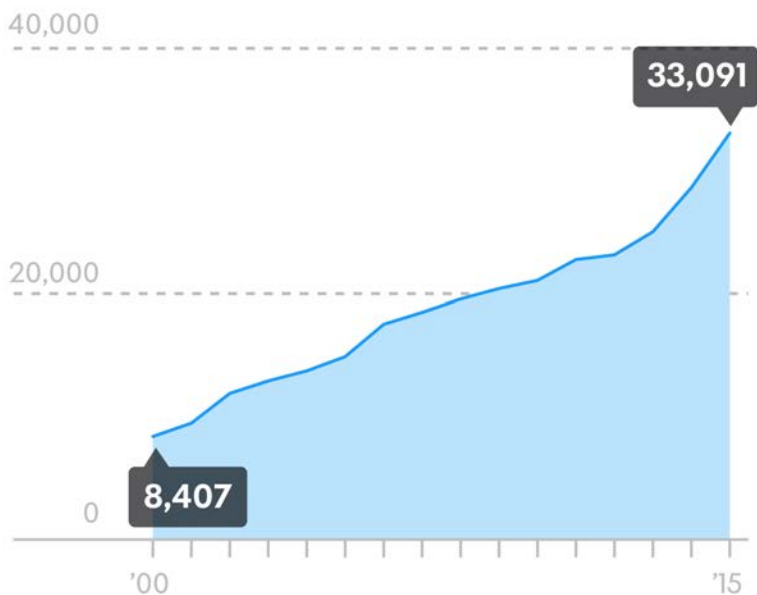
“If there’s all of a sudden an immediate influx of either overdoses or access to drugs that we may not have been aware of that are causing overdoses, because of tainted or bad drugs, we would be able to jump right in and identify that problem,” he said.

The map also enables deputies to pinpoint which areas of the county are most in need of early intervention and education, said Vice and Narcotics Bureau Lt. John Poling.

“We’ll hopefully be able to use it for more of our community engagement,” he said.

(Story continues below graphic.)

OVERDOSE DEATHS FROM OPIOIDS NEARLY QUADRUPLED SINCE 2000



SOURCE National Center on Health Statistics

USA TODAY

Since the program — accessible only to law enforcement officers, public health officials and first responders — went live April 14, the Sheriff’s Office has mapped 32 suspected heroin overdoses, including four that were fatal. But those numbers represent only overdoses that the Sheriff’s Office encountered.

To help complete the countywide picture of heroin overdoses, other agencies, including Collier EMS, will feed information into the system.

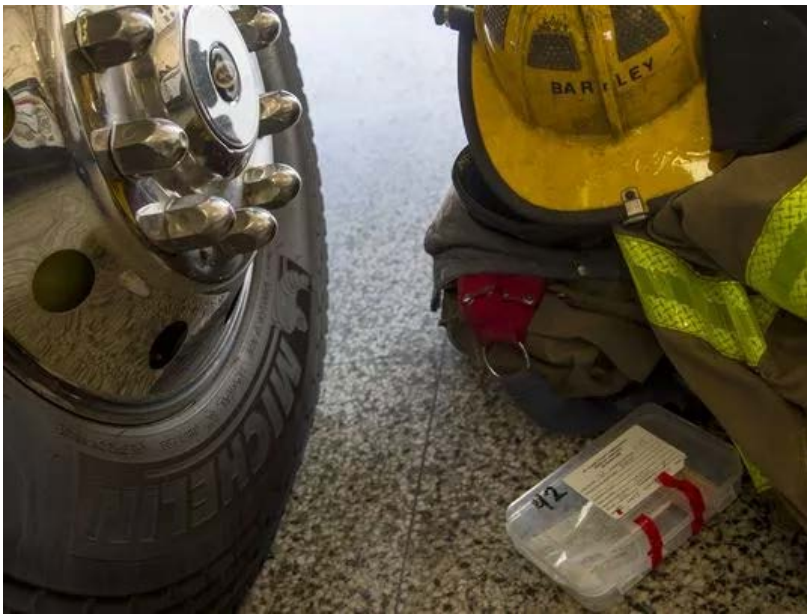
NCH Healthcare System is providing data to the Sheriff’s Office to be entered on the map, said Sheriff’s Office spokeswoman Karie Partington. The law enforcement agency will invite Physicians Regional Healthcare System to participate as well.

“A lot of times, unless there is a fatality, the Sheriff’s Office may not get all of the overdose data that are occurring that we actually see on our side,” EMS Chief Tabatha Butcher said. “So having that EMS data piece is very beneficial for them to be able to track where these things are happening.”

More: [Naples detective says pair smoked heroin with child in car \(/story/news/crime/2017/06/24/naples-residents-charged-heroin-possession-child-neglect/426236001/\)](/story/news/crime/2017/06/24/naples-residents-charged-heroin-possession-child-neglect/426236001/)

Collier EMS plans to partner with the Sheriff’s Office on the program by Oct. 1, Butcher said.

“It could help us from a safety standpoint, because if we’re able to access and see where drug overdoses are occurring, you know, our paramedics and EMTs that are working in those areas will be able to know that maybe they need to have their guard up a little bit more,” she said.



Narcan is a name-brand of the drug Naloxone, which reverses a narcotic overdose in an emergency. The number of overdoses in the county have been increasing year over year, which means tri-hospital EMS and local fire departments are using it more. (Photo: Brian M. Wells/Times Herald)

The program also would guide the agency to stock vehicles in overdose-heavy areas with more Narcan, Butcher said.

"It helps our paramedics and EMTs be more prepared for what they're about to walk into," she said.

Starting Oct. 1, a new state law will require Collier EMS to report overdose data to the state. The overdose maps will make that easier, Butcher said.

"This will actually help us have an avenue to do that," she said.

Though it is often difficult for first responders to determine what exactly a person took, Butcher said, the agency has seen an uptick in overdoses.

"We've definitely seen an increase over this past year and a half of Narcan use and overdoses as a whole," she said.

More: [Collier County pair take plea deals in heroin case, get 15 years in prison \(/story/news/crime/2017/06/20/two-plead-large-collier-heroin-ring-case-get-15-years-each/412418001/\)](#)

From Jan. 1, 2016, through May 10, 2017, Collier paramedics administered Narcan — the drug used to treat heroin overdoses — 402 times, or 0.8 times per day, according to an EMS medication usage report.

In 2015, EMS saw a 200 percent increase in heroin-related overdoses compared to 2014, with reported heroin overdoses increasing from 18 to 54 year over year.

Heroin-related deaths also rose in Collier.

From 2007 through 2013, deaths where the drug was present in the deceased's body and fatalities that were caused by it totaled four, according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's 2015 Medical Examiners Commission Drug Report.

In 2014 that number jumped to 14. The next year it decreased slightly to 11.

In the first half of 2016, there were four heroin-related deaths in Collier, according to FDLE's 2016 Medical Examiners Commission Interim Drug Report, published in May.



Heroin (Photo: File)

Collier's volume of heroin overdoses has not yet reached the staggering levels other states and Florida counties have seen. The West Palm Beach area, for instance, led the state in heroin deaths in the first half of 2016 with 97, according to the FDLE data.

But it nonetheless amounts to a crisis, said Nancy Dauphinais, chief operating officer at the David Lawrence Center and a certified addiction professional.

"I would definitely say we have too many overdose deaths," she said. "And they're growing."

Before users switch to heroin, they often start with prescription painkillers, Dauphinais said.

"It might have been after a surgery, it might have been an injury, a car accident," she said. "They start taking opiates (opioids), it relieves their pain and it creates a little bit of euphoria, a little bit of feel good."

But some quickly develop a tolerance, she said, causing them to take more of the drugs to reach the same effects and block the pain or "just feel normal."

"Eventually, it gets really hard to find that many pills," Dauphinais said.

So users begin to snort or inject the drugs.

"And then it gets really expensive," she said. "So folks are often introduced to heroin as a cheaper alternative to the prescription pain medications."

More: [Washington Notebook: Opioid crisis declaration welcomed in Florida \(/story/news/politics/2017/08/13/opioid-crisis-declaration-welcomed-florida/561595001/\)](http://www.washingtonnotebook.com/story/news/politics/2017/08/13/opioid-crisis-declaration-welcomed-florida/561595001/)

Recovery can take a long time, but there are treatments that work, Dauphinais said.

"There is hope," she said. "Recovery is available."

The Sheriff's Office hopes it never has to get to that point. That's why officials, like Rambosk, are optimistic the proactive new program can help root out the problem before it reaches epidemic status.

Although the focus is heroin now, Rambosk and Butcher said they hope the mapping tool eventually can be used to plot all types of overdoses.

"I want to look at all of them, not just the heroin-related overdoses," Rambosk said. "I think it would help us in our effort to intervene and prevent as we move along."

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