

Overdose amnesty program hopes to curb fatal OD numbers



Michael Throne, Editor

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(Photo: Gazette file)

CHILLICOTHE - After a year that will likely see Ross County post a record number of overdose deaths, county officials are banding together to create a program that will they believe

Ross County Prosecutor Matthew Schmidt announced the Overdose Amnesty conference that included Chillicothe Law Director Sherri Rutherford, Ross County Police Chief Keith Washburn.

"Heroin is not worth dying over," Schmidt said. "Law enforcement officials in the county want to see addicts get help, than get arrested. We would rather see lives saved, than lives lost."

To that end, Schmidt announced the program that will give amnesty to any person overdosing, or believes that they are overdosing, and calls for emergency request amnesty on misdemeanor drug charges, including drug possession, paraphernalia, instruments, permitting drug abuse and drug paraphernalia charges. Amnesty

engaged in drug trafficking, he said.

"This is not for drug dealers," Schmidt said. "You won't be able to avoid charges"

The amnesty program has been developed in the last few months by Schmidt's office in conjunction with the Ross County Police Department and other law enforcement agencies in the county.

"Ross County, like many other counties in Ohio, is faced with epidemic opiate abuse," he said. "A tragic result of this epidemic is drug overdose deaths. Far too often, emergency responders are not alerted to an overdose until it is too late to provide care."

The program does not require the person to stay at the scene until rescue crews arrive, unlike some other laws across the state. Treatment programs will be given to anyone who stays at the scene, but going to treatment is not mandatory for those who

Already in place in 34 states (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/civil-and-criminal-justice/drug-overdose-immunity-good-samaritan-laws>) Kentucky, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Illinois, generally "Good Samaritan" laws allow a caller to report someone poisoning to emergency to law enforcement without the fear of being prosecuted for supervision violations and low-level drug offenses. Ohio has such a law, but House Bill 249 seeks to create one and is currently in the House Judiciary Committee.

Schmidt said he is currently prosecuting one case for reckless homicide where the accused tried to revive an overdose victim by performing CPR on the victim and beating him with a pan. The man — who was not named and was not listed in online court records — was perforated the victim's bowel and he died a few days later. Rutherford said there is one case in municipal court of a man reporting the overdose death of a friend in his driveway. Both cases are still pending.

The announcement comes at a time when local officials believe the number of drug overdose deaths could top 40 ([/story](#))

[/07/weekend-sees-multiple-suspected-overdose-deaths/76917198/](#)) in 2015, up from 28 in 2014, which was a new record. The Coroner's Office has reported 29 fatal overdoses in the county.

Washburn said the police department handled five drug overdose calls on Dec. 23-24 alone and, on Monday, there were three methamphetamine lab busts.

Lavender and Washburn both said the addition of training and ability to use Narcan, an overdose-counteracting drug, is helping to reduce overdoses. Chillicothe police [started carrying the drug \(/story/news/local/2015/11/10/police-administer-first-dose-narcan/\)](#) and Ross deputies [\(/story/news/local/2015/12/28/sheriffs-deputies-administer-first-narcan-doses/77967366/\)](#) have had it

"Heroin use and drug overdoses have invaded every section of our community," said Rutherford. "It doesn't know a social class. In some cases, there's a generational aspect to it as well.

"This is not a panacea, but it's one step in combating the problem."

Schmidt did say the amnesty program will not allow someone to avoid a probation violation, bond violation or Drug Court violation because he cannot establish a rule that supersedes judicial powers.

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