

The Columbus Dispatch

Chief deputy: Treatment, not arrest, best prescription for addiction

By Kimball Perry

The Columbus Dispatch

Posted May 28, 2017 at 8:50 PM

Updated May 28, 2017 at 8:50 PM

Every day, Sgt. Shawn Pak saw the damage heroin and opioids cause in his job at the Franklin County jail. And the deputy with the county sheriff's office believed addicts were responsible for their own misery.

"It was kind of businesslike, kind of a detached view," Pak said.

That view changed, though, when the brother of Pak's best friend became addicted to heroin, bringing to his family the pain and helplessness so many other families have suffered.

Pak changed his attitude after "seeing the pain in my best friend's eyes" when he told Pak about the horror addiction imposed on his family. The family's matriarch, who is like a second mother to Pak, is now terrified by the telephone.

"She told me, 'Every time the phone rings, I'm expecting it be be the call that he's dead,'" Pak said.

The family was elated when that brother was taken off the streets.

"He's in jail," Pak said. "They're relieved. At least he's alive."

Rick Miner, the department's chief deputy, wants more first responders to undergo Pak's change in attitude if they want to save lives.

Miner, who has been a deputy for 26 years, used to believe addicts were too selfish to care about anyone else, so they deserved their woes.

But he came to the same conclusion as Pak after taking part in a prostitution sting to arrest young women who sold their bodies to get money for drugs. After that sting, Minerd ultimately decided law enforcement officers should help addicts get treatment.

“I used to think addicts came from bad families,” Minerd said. “The more I learned (about addiction), the more of an open mind I had.”

Law enforcement officers are taking more drugs than ever off of the streets, but more people are dying. Last year, 353 people in Franklin County died from drug overdoses, a 10 percent increase over the 321 who died in 2015. As the heroin and opioid epidemic made a deadly sweep across Ohio, the 2015 statewide overdose deaths of 3,050 people rose in 2016 to 4,149 deaths, a 36 percent increase.

Because the old attitudes haven’t worked, Minerd said, he is helping to change them. Law enforcement will better serve the community, he said, by better understanding addiction’s hold.

“I think it’s one of the biggest gaps that’s here — a misunderstanding from cops and the community of what addiction is,” he said.

“Some of those experiences open people’s eyes. I think for cops, you have to be slapped in the face.”

More and more, health and addiction professionals note that addiction is an illness that can be treated with proper time, tools and techniques. None of those include dumping addicts in jails. That doesn’t mean no arrests. It means smarter arrests.

“We have to educate cops on what addiction is, to allow cops to be traffic cops for addiction,” Minerd said.

It also means addicts have to want to get clean, which might take several rounds of rehabilitation to stay clean.

“It’s still a choice. You have to work extremely hard,” Minerd said.

Last week, Franklin County’s Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Board announced it will provide \$1 million for a two-year program to provide rehabilitation, mental health and other services for overdose patients.

That program stems from the county's HOPE task force, or Heroin Overdose Prevention and Education. It is a collaboration of government agencies and social workers to crack down on drug dealers, including prosecuting those who provide drugs that result in overdose deaths, and to place those who overdose in treatment and educate them.

"We are trailblazers in Ohio," Miner said of the HOPE model.

Miner wants the Ohio attorney general, whose office runs the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy, to include training about addiction and rehabilitation.

The Franklin County sheriff's office already is providing more training for its deputies, including how to administer naloxone, the drug that can offset the effects of an opiate overdose.

"It's a mindset that we continue to turn around," Miner said.

The design of the new jail that Franklin County plans to open in 2019 will reflect that change by adding more space to educate inmates about addiction.

"It's slowly changing," Miner said. "I do think it's working."