

DeWine hears from public about drug abuse issue

State Attorney General Mike DeWine recited the number of fatal heroin overdoses in 2013 for several counties during a forum Friday.

He said there were seven in Richland County, but Coroner Dr. Stewart Ryckman corrected him to say there were 16.

“That’s a shocking number,” DeWine said.

DeWine previously announced the Ohio Attorney General’s Drug Abuse Community Forum series. Each meeting will give residents the opportunity to discuss drug abuse concerns with DeWine and a panel of local experts. Friday’s meeting at the Ontario branch of the Mansfield/Richland County Public Library was the fourth of its kind.

DeWine said when he was a county prosecutor in the 1970s, he saw very little heroin. Now, he said, it is in all 88 counties.



Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine discusses drug abuse concerns at a community forum Friday at the Ontario branch of the Mansfield/Richland County Public Library.

Before turning the forum over to the local experts, DeWine said the three keys to dealing with the drug problem are education, prevention and treatment.

Mansfield Municipal Court Judge Jerry Ault, a former assistant prosecutor, agreed that heroin is the biggest drug issue locally.

“We’d see it come in pockets,” Ault said of his days at the prosecutor’s office. “Now it’s here, and it’s here to stay until we find a way to get rid of it.

“The bottom line is treatment, treatment, treatment.”

Mansfield police Chief Ken Coontz, former commander of the METRICH Enforcement Unit, and Ryckman lamented the lack of money to fight the drug problem.

“It boils down to dollars sometimes,” Coontz said. “There has to be funds for enforcement.”

Ryckman had his own concerns.

“Statewide there isn’t proper funding for autopsies,” the coroner said. “It could help greatly in making a proper diagnosis.”

Ryckman also noted there is no standardized method of reporting overdoses.

“It gets confusing when we’re all collecting in different ways,” he said.

DeWine agreed.

“There’s no real state protocol, and there should be,” he said.

Mary Bolin offered a different perspective. She is the mother of a recovering addict.

“Our lives will never be the same,” Bolin said. “I look at addiction as a disease. If people realize that, it will make a difference.”

Bolin said if she had it to do over again, she would have intervened sooner.

Mansfield City Schools Superintendent Brian Garverick appealed to the standing-room-only crowd.

“This is going to take a team effort by everyone in this room coming together,” he said. “There are no silver bullets with such a complex issue in our society.”

Garverick said he is trying to resurrect a program at the high school called Natural Helpers, which would involve students working with their peers. He said such a program would give students with drug problems an outlet.

“Kids are going to tell their friends before they tell their parents or a teacher,” Garverick said.

State Rep. Mark Romanchuk, R-Ontario, said he also looks at the drug problem as an employer, pointing out many would-be employees fail a drug test or don't come back when told they will have to take one.

Joe Trolan, executive director of the Mental Health & Recovery Services board, revisited the funding issue.

"We receive about \$1 for drug and alcohol treatment for every \$10 we receive for mental health," he said.

The concerns raised by the panel illustrate why the war on drugs is so hard to win.

"The problem is not going to be solved until people in every county decide they want to solve it," DeWine said.

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