

Task force tackles drug issue

The METRICH Enforcement Unit wants to remove 647 grams of heroin from the streets this year.

It already has seized 604 grams, the equivalent of 1.33 pounds.

Removing drugs is only one measure of the success of drug enforcement, according to Mansfield police Chief Ken Coontz, who doubles as the program director for METRICH.

“It’s a multifaceted approach,” he said. “It includes courts, the prosecutor’s office, the police departments, the community programs and treatment.

“You have to hit it on all sides.”

METRICH is a 10-county decentralized task force.

“We allow each county to address the drug problem the way they see fit,” Coontz said. “Not all 10 counties have the same condition.”

Ohio’s 38 task forces often take different approaches to eliminating drugs in their counties, leading to one county sending 32 drug dealers per 10,000 residents to prison while others sent fewer than one per 10,000 residents over five years.

“Each task force should be judged on how many convictions they can get and how high up the food chain they can go,” Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine said.

Task force commanders are working on best practices to make enforcement more uniform across the state. By partnering with the Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services, they hope to survey members on practices from serving search warrants when the offender has a gun and handling confidential informants to categorizing evidence and reporting money seized.

All task forces are dealing with heroin, which has led to four of the eight fatal overdoses Richland County has seen this year. In 2013, METRICH set a goal of removing 542 grams of heroin. It confiscated about twice that amount.

Coontz has been around long enough to know something else will replace heroin at some point.

“These things are cyclical,” he said.

Part of successful enforcement, Coontz said, is to anticipate drug trends.

When METRICH formed in 1986, the most prevalent drugs in the region were Dilaudid and Percocet. In the 1990s, crack cocaine moved to the forefront.

More recently, synthetic drugs, especially bath salts, almost became an epidemic. Coontz said METRICH was able to put a huge dent in the trade by arresting the primary bath salts dealer in the area.

“Bath salts are still out there, but not in the terms that they were before,” he said.

Still, Coontz said task forces shouldn’t be held solely responsible for stomping out drugs in a community. He calls the idea “absurd.”

“In Richland County, we try to measure our success by going out every day and doing our part,” Coontz said.

METRICH sets five objectives each year. They include the amount of heroin seized, number of prescription drug cases, search warrants served, weapons seized and education presentations.

To obtain money for a Justice Assistance Grant, a task force is required to submit only two objectives.

“Overall, we have put ourselves under the microscope,” Coontz said. “It will help us to stay focused on what’s important.”

In the grant application, a task force has to submit a problem statement and a target population. The project objectives have to match.

A task force also has to provide a timeline of activities and demonstrate an organizational capacity to manage the grant.

Last year, METRICH received \$132,000 from JAG. It got \$112,050 in 2014.

“Grants are getting cut further and further,” Mansfield police Deputy Chief Keith Porch said. “When you have less of it, it impedes operations.

“There’s very expensive equipment when you’re dealing with covert operations. Drug prices continue to rise, not fall.”

In Richland County, a half-gram of heroin went for \$120 in April.

“It’s about resources,” Coontz said. “I would buy drugs 24 hours a day if we could. It depends on the economics of the region. We don’t use that as a crutch, but we do what we can with the resources we have at the time.”

Porch said while the ultimate goal is to arrest the major drug dealers and seize large quantities of drugs, the reality is that 95 percent of regional dealers are low-level.

“When you talk about measuring success, it’s a tricky question to answer,” Coontz said. “If your objective is to stomp out drugs completely, that’s a very lofty measure. To try to determine what everybody agrees on as success of a task force is subjective.”

Resources also involve manpower. Until recently, METRICH had three detectives and a supervisor. Earlier this spring, the Richland County Sheriff’s Office and the Shelby Police Department each assigned a person to work at METRICH full-time.

Still, it’s hard to keep up with the workload. In 2013, Richland County received 2,075 complaints about drug activity.

“I get so much intel that I can’t address all of it,” Coontz said. “If we followed up on all those, we’d get nothing else done.”

Sentencing reforms designed to reduce the prison population also have provided challenges for task forces. Many dealers are charged with fourth- or fifth-degree felonies, low enough that they will receive probation.

A Media Network of Central Ohio investigation published last week found the same drug deal could mean prison, probation or a dismissed case in different parts of the state.

“We are not judge and jury,” Coontz said. “We don’t dictate what sentence they get out of it.”

Ontario police Detective Jon Sigler said light sentences for people involved in drugs can be frustrating to law enforcement.

“Some of these guys have told us it’s worth continuing to commit the crimes,” he said.

Porch added dealers can be difficult to track because they move from city to city and county to county.

Sigler contends METRICH is effective in drug enforcement.

“The guys that do these drug investigations, they know what they’re doing. I couldn’t do it,” he said. “We send any sort of drug concerns over to METRICH.”

DeWine pointed out if police chiefs or sheriffs are not satisfied with how their task force operates, they can leave the group.

For METRICH, success is partially measured by the quality of life in neighborhoods.

“I feel like we’re doing our part,” Coontz said. “I feel as a county we can do more. (For example), I think we need a lot more talking between community groups.

“Are we there in Richland County? No, but as a community, we’re moving in the right direction.”

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