

## Two more fatal OD's make total 19

Officials credit a couple of recent METRICH Enforcement Unit sweeps for a downturn in fatal overdoses.

Since the last News Journal update, which ran Aug. 21, there have been two fatal overdoses. The yearly total is 19. Of those, 10 — including the two most recent — were heroin-related.

In a two-week span in June alone, four people in Richland County died of overdoses.

On June 12, METRICH targeted 31 suspects during a drug sweep. They confiscated nearly 36 grams of heroin.

On Sept. 10, METRICH searched nine Shelby residences and arrested six people.

"Since METRICH made that big bust, it (rate of fatal overdoses) has slowed way down," coroner's Investigator Tom Stortz said. "It makes a big impact. Tip your hat to them."

Mansfield police Assistant Chief Keith Porch, who helps keep tabs on METRICH, said heroin seems to be the drug of choice.

"We're still aggressively tracking the traffickers in heroin," he said. "It's a trend across the state that's proving No. 1 for the METRICH task force."

The News Journal and CentralOhio.com are taking an individual look at each overdose case to put a human face on the rampant drug problem and to help erase the stigma surrounding the issue.

The most recent overdose victims were Stephen Lee, 28, and Joel Thatcher, 33. A number of other cases are pending, awaiting toxicology results.

Lee was found unresponsive in the 600 block of Carol Lane on June 27. His fiance reported speaking to Lee one hour before returning home, finding him and calling for medical help.

Lee was transported to the OhioHealth MedCentral Mansfield Hospital emergency room, where he was pronounced dead.

According to the coroner's report, Lee had used heroin in the past but had maintained a job and reported he was not using. He seemed to be doing well and had worked that day until evening.

A coroner's investigator reported finding several needle punctures on both arms.

Thatcher was found in the 700 block of Wildwood Drive by his father on July 30. His father had last seen Thatcher alive the evening before after bringing him home from work in Shelby.

According to the coroner's report, a spoon, syringe and powder were found near the body. Thatcher reportedly had a history of heroin abuse and had recently been released from rehab.

On Jan. 1, 2013, Thatcher accidentally overdosed and was revived in the emergency room after being given Narcan.

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