

A brighter future?

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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New GFD program will go beyond first response to overdoses

Firefighters and emergency medical technicians are often the first people on the scene when someone suffers a catastrophic drug overdose. They show up when called and do their best to stabilize the victim and get them to a hospital. Most of the time, responders never know what happens to the patient after that.

But the Gallup Fire Department is about to roll out a new program that aims to head off drug overdoses at the pass. Gallup will be the third city in New Mexico – the other two are Santa Fe and Las Cruces – running the pilot program designed to intervene in these troubled situations and try to stem the tide of addiction and overdoses.

“In our day-to-day operations, when we have a drug overdose, our job ends with getting them narkan and getting them to a hospital,” Fire Chief Jesus Morales said. “This allows us to go a step further and reach out to that survivor. At some point we want to be there so when they do have that change, when they are ready to get treatment, we can help them.”

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The city has won a grant to hire a social worker and another EMT whose job will be to train family members and friends of overdose victims to administer narcan (naloxone) in emergencies, and stay involved after the event to try to help connect victims with addiction treatment programs.

“The social worker and EMT will do a lot of outreach, coordinating with agencies in the community. One overdose is one too many, especially in our community,” Morales said. “Opioids are readily available, and now we have fentanyl.”

The new team, funded by a First Responders-Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act grant, won’t go on emergency calls; rather, they will follow up with overdose survivors and their families and peer groups. Morales said the department hopes to make the new hires in June and have them trained and on the job by July.

The new program should also help with data collection about who in this community suffers drug overdoses and what interventions are most successful.

Hardly a community in the nation has escaped the reach of opioid addiction. When pharmaceutical opioids came on the scene as a miracle drug for treating pain, the problem came out of the shadows and into middle class homes as never before.

Today the problem is deeply embedded in middle America: once the province of seedy criminals and foreign drug lords, opioid addiction has grown over the last two decades. And while much of the attention has focused on youth, a just-released report from nonprofit America’s Health Rankings found that drug-related deaths among adults ages 65 to 74 years have increased 147% over the last decade. It doesn’t really fit the picture most people have of drug abuse.

Narcan has been a boon in emergencies. In an opioid overdose, the drug works on the user’s body so it essentially forgets to breathe. “Your respiration gets decreased to the point that you are no longer breathing. Delivering narcan reverses those receptors in the brain,” Morales said, but in the moment, revived patients are in no condition to think about the future.

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“They are impaired. They don’t realize how close they were to death because with the naran we are basically bringing them back,” Morales said. “They don’t realize how close they were because they were impaired at that point. They don’t realize that we were having to breathe for them.”

Gallup EMTs have administered naran in 22 cases so far this year. While the intervention may save a life, it does nothing to prevent future incidents. The new team’s goal will be to help users change their lives, Morales said.

“The end result we want is to have the survivor referred to facilities for treatment. Help the survivor find their path to finding treatment,” he said. “We hope it’s something that will grow and sustain itself for that risk reduction.”

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