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The Lewiston Tribune
Lewiston, Idaho
Monday January 15, 2018
Tom Holm
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Overdose deaths on the rise

Nez Perce County authorities saw a spike in 2017, triggered primarily by methamphetamines; suicides also took a jump

Nez Perce County had a lot of families lose a loved one to drug overdoses last year.

Thirteen people died of a drug overdose in the county, at least double the number of any single year in the past nine years. The county coroner's office compiled the figures, finding that overdose deaths spiked last year compared to the three overdose deaths recorded in 2016.

In five of the 13 deaths, two or more drugs were present at the time of death. In the remainder, one drug was attributed to the overdose - most commonly methamphetamine.

In 2014, 2013 and 2012, six people died of drug overdoses, with every other year in the nine years recorded totaling zero to three deaths per year.

Lewiston Fire Department Chief Travis Myklebust said the Lewiston City Council asked him to look into opioid-inhibitor use by his paramedics in the city to determine if police should be carrying Narcan, the brand name for the opioid overdose revival tool.

Myklebust said his study of the call volume showed there has not been a strong increase in paramedics administering Narcan.

"We do see more overdose calls," Myklebust said. "But it's not a large spike, and we are not administering more Narcan in the field."

One reason Myklebust's estimate differs from the coroner's figures is paramedics would not be called if a subject were found already deceased.

But the issue is pervasive. While the Lewiston Tribune was speaking with Myklebust recently, a call went out over dispatch about a person overdosing on drugs in Asotin County.

In tandem with drug overdoses, the region has seen an uptick in suicide deaths and has the highest rate of suicides in the Gem State. Idaho routinely ranks in the top 10 states for highest suicide rates nationally.

"Drug use and abuse - those things all are triggers, and it's all wound together," Myklebust said.

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In Nez Perce, Idaho, Latah, Lewis and Clearwater counties, 35 people died by suicide in 2016. Designated as Region 2 by the non-profit Suicide Prevention Action Network, the region had 32.4 suicides per 100,000 residents and has stayed the highest in the state with a five-year average of 25 per 100,000 residents.

SPAN Region 2 co-chair Steve Button said on average suicides, especially from drug overdoses, are underrepresented by about 20 percent. Button said inconclusive results in death investigations can lead to some suicides being declared accidental overdoses.

"It tends to be hard for families to accept suicide instead of an accident due to the intentionality of it," Button said.

The grim tally of deaths in the county and region have encouraged Button to push for increased access to mental health treatment and to double down on promoting annual walks and awareness events SPAN hosts in the area. Every fall and April, SPAN supports awareness campaigns, especially in the schools where Button is a social worker for the Lewiston School District.

"We had a full-day conference last year and (have) another one planned this spring," Button said.

Button said SPAN offers free training to anyone who requests it on the "Gatekeeper" program, a suicide prevention technique used to recognize early warning signs. Button characterized the training as similar to CPR but for those showing signs of suicidal ideation.

The training offers comprehensive and useful ways to question individuals and refer them to resources if they are having suicidal thoughts. The delicate subject can be difficult to discuss, but Button said part of the training is destigmatizing mental illness and suicide. One of the key tenets of the training is informing others about suspicions that a friend is suicidal.

"I try to make staff and kids aware suicide is the one thing that can't be confidential," Button said. "If you have a friend who says something, you can't keep things secret or private; my catchphrase is 'Save your friendship or save a life.' "

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