

In 2013, 24 overdose deaths occurred in Chester County where the deceased – 14 men and 10 women, ranging in age from 21 to 79 – had heroin in their systems. The racial breakdown was 22 Caucasian, 1 African-American, and 1 Latino. Out of the 24 deaths, 18 deaths involved both heroin and prescription drugs.

“We have seen the problems created by heroin and believed it was important to begin to track this information in Chester County,” said Chester County Coroner Dr. Gordon Eck. “Our hope is that, by working together, the Coroner’s Office and the District Attorney’s Office can use these statistics to raise public awareness, spot emerging trends, and save lives.”

Hogan, who chairs the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) strike force, a joint federal and local law enforcement regional program to combat drugs, said officials have learned prescription drug abuse provides a gateway to a heroin overdose: People start by using prescription drugs like Oxycodone, then switch to heroin because it is cheaper and easier to obtain.

HIDTA intelligence has tracked heroin laced with fentanyl – a powerful opiate linked to more than 20 overdose deaths in western Pennsylvania – to suburban Philadelphia, he said, noting that the heroin was stamped “BAD NEWS.” Although no fentanyl-laced heroin has been found yet in Chester County, officials fear it will surface.

In addition, Hogan said HIDTA intelligence revealed that while Philadelphia is known as a leading source of pure, cheap heroin, 80 percent of non-Philadelphia heroin arrests were for defendants from suburban Philadelphia counties: Bucks, 30 percent; Delaware, 21 percent; Montgomery, 20 percent; and Chester, 9 percent.

Hogan said many devastated parents in Chester County can attest to heroin’s presence. For example, Pam Moules lost her 22-year-old son, Jonathan, this year to a heroin overdose during his winter break from Penn State, telling Hogan: “Many people have told us, ‘If it can happen in your family, it can happen to any one of our children.’”

Jacki Smiro lost her son RJ, a funny, gifted 17-year-old to a prescription drug overdose, Hogan said. “To us, he was one in a million,” said Smiro. “But in the year he died, he was 1 in 15,000 people who died from a prescription drug overdose.”

Andy Rumford, who lost his 23-year-old daughter, Kacie Erin Rumford, to a heroin overdose last year in Kennett Square, channeled his grief into creating Kacie’s Cause, a nonprofit dedicated to eliminating such tragedies. Rumford and members of his team have organized town-hall meetings, set up support groups, and disseminated flyers. More information on his effort can be found at www.kaciescause.com.

Hogan said the county is fighting back. “We have arrested and will continue to crack down on the dealers,” he said. “Together with Rep. Becky Corbin, we have created a prescription drug drop-box program to stop the cycle that begins with prescription drug abuse. Together with Sen. Dominic Pileggi, we are pursuing Good Samaritan legislation to encourage users to call 9-1-1 if a friend overdoses.”

Hogan said the county is also working with a group of health-care providers to start a Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education (NOPE) chapter in Chester County. NOPE is an organization that works to prevent drug abuse through education, family support, and advocacy.

The NOPE chapter of Chester County is now forming, supported by an initial grant of \$5,000 from the Chester County District Attorney’s Office, Hogan said. Anybody who is interested in joining NOPE or getting more information can contact Beth Mingey from Holcomb Behavioral Health System at 484-444-0412.

Willistown Township Police Chief John Narcise said no neighborhood is immune from the dangers. “Even in a safe community like Willistown, heroin is reaching our schools and neighborhoods and is destroying families,” he said. “We need to be creative in dealing with this problem from education to enforcement... We cannot act like the problem is not coming to Chester County, because it is already here.”