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Sarasota, Fla. Called on NOPE to Help Stop Spread of Drugs

Following a rise in overdose deaths and prescription drugs fraud, officials started a NOPE Task Force chapter to educate youths on the dangers of drugs. They plan to reach 35,000 students with NOPE's emotional presentations.

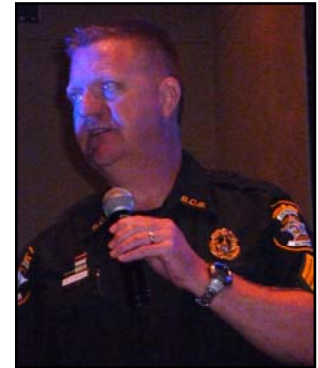
By Leon Fooksman

SARASOTA, Fla. -- This vibrant city has splendid beaches, trendy shopping centers and a bustling tourism industry.

It also has a drug problem.

At least 48 people have died of drug overdoses this year --- close to twice the state average -- many from misusing and abusing prescription opiate painkillers like oxycodone, methadone, and depressants, according to the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office.

In response, the authorities here established a specialized police unit dedicated to investigating a rise in prescription drugs fraud, commonly called "doctor shopping." They started a program allowing residents to turn in unused or expired prescription pills from their medicine cabinets in exchange for gift certificates.



More recently, police, education, and community organizers created a NOPE Task Force chapter to educate students on the dangers of drugs. Their goal is to reach 35,000 middle and high school students with the organization's blunt and emotional presentations.



"Like any other city, the drugs here are getting bad," said Sgt. Ricky Beasley of the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office who is overseeing the NOPE chapter. "If we can get the students in middle and high schools to learn about drugs, we can make a big difference."

Beasley said authorities need youths and their parents to understand the true risks of getting high off pain pills -- that even one wrong combination of drugs can be fatal. He said his daughter's high school classmates openly talk about using painkillers as a social drug.

"I'd like the parents to know that this doesn't just happen to someone else," Beasley said. "We need to get the word out that this is real."

Cindy Harney lost her son, Garrett, a 20-year-old truck company owner, to an overdose from a mix of prescription pills in 2006. He got hooked on painkillers following a hernia operation.

Harney is a part of Sarasota's NOPE chapter and will be going into schools to share her son's story and the impact his death has had on her family. She believes schools need to better emphasize the dangers of prescription drugs through a more intensive anti-drug curriculum.

"We have to educate our kids about these pills. They think it's safe and legal just because they're available in pharmacies," Harney said. "We put helmets on our kids when they ride bikes and we put seat belts on them when they drive, but what are we doing to protect them from this epidemic?"



NOPE's presentations bring police officers, counselors and parents who lost loved ones to drugs into schools, colleges and community centers. More than 150,000 students and parents have heard the presentations in recent years. Sarasota is NOPE's seventh chapter in Florida, California and Indiana.

Sarasota's first high school presentation is scheduled for the first week of December. The Sheriff's Office has committed 10 deputies and detectives to speak regularly at the schools.

Beasley said he knows it will take a lot of talking and convincing to steer youths away from pills and illicit drugs. But a new approach must be taken to change students' misconceptions and ignorance toward drugs, he stressed.

By combining the new law enforcement effort with NOPE's presentations in schools, Sarasota officials hope to slowly root out the causes of the drug problems.

"We have a beautiful community, but we're not immune from what's happening across the country with drugs," he said.

Leon Fooksman is a journalist who writes for NOPE Task Force. He can be reached at leon@astorytellingcompany.com.