



## St. Petersburg Police bust prescription drug abusers

7:38 PM, Feb 15, 2010 | [comments](#)

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Pinellas Park, Florida -- Prescription drug abuse has helped put Pinellas County on the map in Florida in terms of the number of deaths attributed to the pills.

Last year, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement estimates in the first six months of 2009, lethal levels of oxycodone may be to blame for 87 deaths in the Pinellas-Pasco County areas alone, more than any other area in Florida.

Pinellas-Pasco counties also lead the state in deaths attributed to prescription narcotics, such as hydrocodone and Xanax.

"This has become such an epidemic that it take serious law enforcement attention," said Capt. Robert Alfonso, with the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office.

Ten months ago, the sheriff's office and St. Petersburg Police Department teamed up to create the Pinellas County Diversion Task Force.

During that time, they collected information from pharmacists, doctors, even family members of drug abusers.

By Monday, they identified 74 suspects who they say have illegally gotten their hands on more than 55,000 pills that have a street value exceeding \$750,000.

### **Breakdown of quantities:**

\*Oxycodone: 46,475 pills

\*Oxycontin: 2,066 pills

\*Hydrocodone: 2,432 pills

\*Methadone: 1,680 pills

\*Hydromorphone: 409 pills

\*Xanax: 1,704 pills

\*Soma: 300 pills

**Total pill count: 55,066**

"The truth is, this is a drop in the bucket," explained Capt. Robert Alfonso.

More than a dozen of the 74 suspects were rounded up on Monday as part of the ongoing, "Operation Pill Poppers."

A mother and son duo were among those busted, both are accused of doctor shopping and trafficking.

"We're going to continue to do this and people who are involved in this type of activity, either who are addicted and/or doing it for profit... don't be surprised if we come knocking on your door," said Capt. Alfonso.



Investigators say they'll spend the next few days rounding up the rest of the suspects, including some who live outside Pinellas County lines.

"We're serious about this," said Capt. Alfonso, "We need to change people's minds on this. We want to help people that need help, but those that are not listening will end up in jail."

Mark and Laurie Serra were on scene as the suspects were rounded up, one by one. In 2008, they lost their son Matthew Serra when he overdosed at the age of 28.

"For Mark and I, it gives us hope that some lives can be saved," said Laurie Serra. Matthew was her step-son.

They say Matthew became addicted to the painkillers while he was in college after a swim team doctor prescribed the medication to help him deal with the pain of a previous swimming injury in high school.

They tried everything to help him beat the addiction.

"Eventually the drugs just consumed him," said Laurie Serra.

With the help of the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, the Serras are launching a local N.O.P.E. branch. NOPE stands for Narcotic Overdose Prevention and Education.

The sheriff's office says Sheriff Coats approved \$18,000 in funding last week to get the program off the ground.

The Serras were not only on scene to promote their fight of education against prescription abuse, but let the suspects and their families know that they still have a choice.

"If he ended up being incarcerated instead of passing away, you know what our choice would be," said Laurie Serra.