

Meth biggest drug issue in Garrett County, officials agree

There aren't enough opioid and heroin overdoses to qualify for grant to open treatment facility

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OAKLAND — Methamphetamine, not heroin, is the biggest drug issue in Garrett County, officials said during a town hall meeting on opioid use Thursday in Oakland.

The meeting, held at the Southern Garrett Rescue Squad, was a collaboration between the Garrett County Health Department, Community Action and other concerned agencies and citizens. The group calls



LISA THAYER
WELCH

year, State's Attorney Lisa Thayer Welch said.

"Of course their caseload and their case investigation suggests ...

its initiative "Stand Together — Garrett County Against Drug Abuse."

In 2017, the Garrett County Drug Task Force investigated 120 drug cases and has investigated 60 so far this

that methamphetamines are one of our bigger issues," Welch said.

From 2016 through 2018 there were 15 overdose deaths — two from alcohol, three from a mix of drugs and alcohol and 10 from just drug overdoses, Welch said.

In 2016, the state of Maryland had more than 2,000 overdose deaths, Allegany County had 59 and Garrett County had one, said Bob Stephens, Garrett County health officer.

Garrett County hasn't received a grant for a treatment facility. Most



ASHELY ELLIOT

(its) health department being the official outpatient addictions treatment provider," said Stephens.

"We are trying to address people's problems before they get to

of the grants target opioid and heroin overdoses and the numbers in Garrett County aren't high enough to warrant that, Welch said.

"We are really the only county in the state that has the state that has the official outpatient addictions treatment provider," said Stephens.

that stage (of addiction)," Welch said. "They look in a certain year and see we had no heroin overdose deaths in Garrett County."

The residents and experts who attended were also attempting to find ways to battle drug issues.

"You can't leave your head in the sand and expect someone else to help these people," Sheriff Robert Corley said. "If you didn't feel it in your heart you wouldn't be sitting where you are at right now — you

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realized 'Hey, I've got to fix this.'"

One of the solutions suggested was erasing the stigma of addiction.

"The stigma behind it is very hard, especially when you are in a community like this where everybody knows everybody," said Ashely Elliot, a recovering heroin addict from Garrett County. "We need more people to talk about it. The more we (get to) talk about it, the more open we are, the more information we find out about it, the less shocking it's going to be when you hear they went to treatment."

Heather Hanline, executive director of the Dove Center, spoke with one of the participants in the JEWELS program about what could be done to help addicts.

The program offers a therapeutic approach for women experiencing co-occurring

trauma, past or present abuse and addiction. Hanline started the program in honor of her sister, who died from an overdose.

"She said, 'Please, please do something about the stigma — the stigma is a killer. My brain has been hijacked. When you go into the schools don't tell me how my teeth are going to fall out and I'm going to lose brain cells, tell me about how this is going to destroy my brain, make my brain a slave to this disease — that it will be almost impossible for me to escape,'" Hanline said.

"We need to talk about creating resilience for these people in our community and resources that create resilience," she said.

There are 73 children in foster care with the Garrett County Department of Social Services and at least 51 of the youngsters have at least one parent with substance abuse and addiction issues.

Meth, which can be in either

powder or crystal form, can be smoked, snorted, ingested or swallowed. Those that use meth for a long time can lose weight and have bad teeth, said Dr. Richard Perry, of the Garrett Treatment Center. It can cause strokes, liver, kidney or lung damage.

"The damage it causes to the blood vessels in the brain can cause permanent memory loss and the inability to grasp abstract thoughts," Perry said.

As of Monday, 20 of the 38 men and six of the eight women incarcerated at Garrett County Detention Center were held on drug or drug-related charges, Welch said.

Stephens told those in attendance that there were three main takeaways from the meeting: prevention works if done right, treatment is effective and recovery is possible.

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