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Inside ExploreLI

TOP STORIES

'GLIMMER OF HOPE'

LI data for 2018 show decrease in fatal overdoses

BY MICHAEL O'KEEFFE
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Fatal opioid overdoses in Nassau and Suffolk combined fell nearly 24 percent last year, officials said Tuesday, numbers that suggest more treatment access, beefed-up enforcement and anti-drug programs have put a dent in a Long Island epidemic that has killed thousands since 2010.

Naloxone, the lifesaving drug used to reverse overdoses, has also kept alive many users who may have otherwise died from opioid abuse, officials said.

Nassau officials said Tuesday that 147 people died as the result of overdoses in 2018, a 20.1 percent decline compared to 184 fatal overdoses in 2017.

"There is a glimmer of hope in these numbers," said Nassau County District Attorney Madeline Singas.

Suffolk officials reported 308 fatal overdoses last year, a 24.9 percent decrease compared to the county's 410 fatal ODs in 2017.

The Suffolk figures do not include 121 suspected overdose deaths — 91 last year and 30 in 2017 — that have not been cleared by Medical Examiner Michael Caplan's office.

The numbers are encouraging but don't mean much to the Long Island families who lost loved ones to opioid overdoses in 2018, said addiction expert Jeffrey Reynolds, president of the Family and Children's Association.

"Until the number is zero, we have a lot of work to do," said Reynolds, whose Mineola-based nonprofit provides counseling and outpatient drug rehabilitation treatment. "But the numbers are moving in the right direction."

Fewer overdoses on Long Island mirror national trends. The Centers for Disease Control said last month that drug overdoses may be declining for the first time in decades. The



The wider availability of naloxone has prevented more overdoses from becoming fatal, officials say.

CDC said preliminary data showed 69,100 overdose deaths for the 12 month-period ending in November 2018, down from 73,200 deaths in 2017.

Singas said her office made it easier for addicts to get help by providing \$585,000 in asset-forfeiture funds from 2015 to Maryhaven's New Hope Crisis Center in Freeport, which offers on-demand inpatient treatment 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Drug users who overdosed in the past were released from emergency rooms to find scant opportunities for treatment. The funds allow drug users to enter treatment at a time when

they are most vulnerable, Singas said. More than 2,200 people have received treatment through New Hope.

"We've been able to reach people in the emergency room," said Ashley Walker, New Hope's director of resident services. "Nassau County has done a really good job of making services available."

In Suffolk County, police have teamed up with the Long Island Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence to create a program called Preventing Incarceration Via Opportunities for Treatment (PIVOT). The program encourages drug

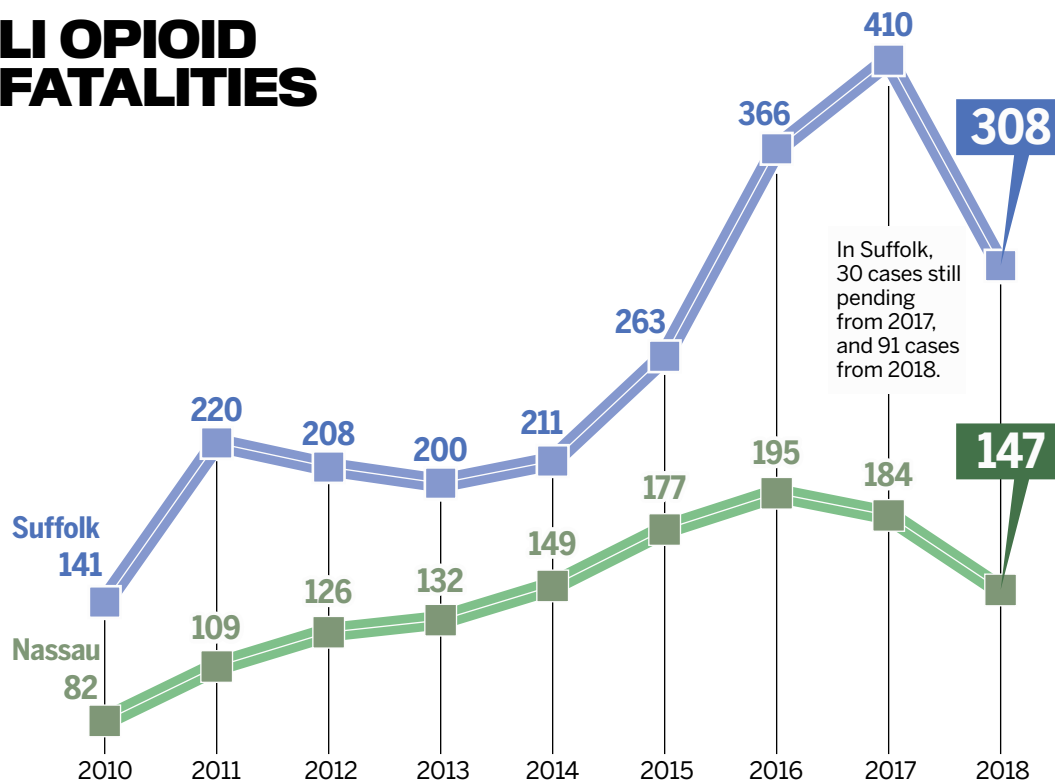
users to seek treatment. Addicts who have survived overdoses or been identified as drug users during encounters with police are referred to LI-CADD counselors, who steer them to treatment programs.

"We will continue to be proactive in ridding our communities of opioids," Suffolk Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart said.

The Nassau County Police Department's "Operation Natalie," named after Natalie Ciappa, a Massapequa teen who died from a drug overdose more than a decade ago, combined treatment, enforcement and educa-

IN OPIOID STATS

LI OPIOID FATALITIES



SOURCES: NASSAU COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE AND SUFFOLK COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE

tion. Police used mapping technology to identify at-risk communities by linking opioid overdoses and thefts from automobiles, which officials say is the most common crime committed by addicts.

The department then intensified enforcement in those neighborhoods, making scores of arrests. Drug dealers were referred to the district attorney's office for prosecution, said Nassau Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder, while users were referred to treatment. Town halls, meanwhile, were held to share information with students, parents and others in the community about addiction, prevention and treatment.

The department has also worked with local wrestling, lacrosse and Little League programs to educate youngsters about drugs. In September, Singas' office will resume the "Not My Child" anti-heroin program in Nassau schools.

"What we are doing is getting the right message out there," Ryder said. "We're not waving the victory flag just yet."

LICADD executive director Steve Chassman said his organization has distributed naloxone — better known as Narcan — to thousands across Long Island. Some of the recipients could have died from overdoses without the lifesaving drug, he said.

"We've done a good job of making sure naloxone is out there," Chassman said.

The agency also provides drug users with fentanyl strips to determine if their heroin was cut with the deadly synthetic opioid. The CDC has said fentanyl is 50 times more powerful than heroin.

While the decline in overdoses is encouraging, officials said, it's not an excuse to become complacent.

"Nassau County has mobilized at full-scale to meet the long-term treatment and education challenges necessary to eradicate this epidemic," County Executive Laura Curran said. "We cannot wait this out — for every additional life we can save, there is another family that does not have to bury a loved one."

Antidote to overdose

■ Naloxone, which goes by the brand name Narcan, blocks virtually all the effects of opioids such as heroin, the synthetic drug fentanyl and the painkiller oxycodone.

■ For several decades, emergency room doctors have used it to treat people who have overdosed.

■ The antidote, which is injected or administered as a nasal spray, knocks out opiate molecules from the brainstem's nerve receptors.

■ When given to a person experiencing a heroin overdose, for example, someone who may be close to dying begins to wake up in a matter of minutes. They still need emergency medical care, because naloxone may wear off before the drug does. Also, it may cause withdrawal symptoms in addicts.

SOURCES: NALOXONEINFO.ORG, NARCAN.COM

Nassau's drug hotline long overdue

BY SCOTT EIDLER
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Plans for a Nassau County substance abuse hotline, and a smartphone app to treatment and recovery resources, have stalled, nearly a year after legislators ordered them, Republican county lawmakers said.

Officials from the administration of Democratic County Executive Laura Curran say, however, that the app launch is imminent and that more drug counselors are staffing the existing catchall crisis center hotline.

The county was supposed to launch the smartphone app 60 days after the legislature required its production, according to the bill passed Aug. 6, 2018. Administration officials say the app is to be released in a few weeks.

Also, the measure required Nassau to establish a 24-hour substance abuse hotline to be staffed with trained addiction specialists. County officials said they would solicit bids for a vendor in the coming weeks, but noted that the existing crisis center hotline had trained substance abuse counselors available. County workers take the calls on workdays and off-hour callers are handled by the Bellmore-based Long Island Crisis Center.

The county was supposed to solicit bids to operate the substance abuse hotline by Aug. 31, 2018, and the hotline was to be up and running within 60 days of a contract award.

The county also was required to advertise the multiple hotlines on public signs in large, bold lettering within 120 days of the bill's passage.

Legis. Rose Marie Walker (R-Hicksville), chairwoman of the health and social services committee, said the time lag concerns her. "It was last August, and here we are in July and haven't moved forward with it."

Legis. C. William Gaylor III (R-Lynbrook) wrote in a July 2 letter to Curran, "The fact that these resources are not operational is unacceptable."

But Carolyn McCummings, commissioner of the Depart-

ment of Human Services, said, "We've always had a hotline available 24 hours, 7 days a week for the residents." The Nassau County Behavioral Health Awareness Campaign hotline, 516-227-TALK, handles a wide range of crises, including suicide prevention.

It takes a long time to prepare a request for proposals package, McCummings said. "There's no way that can be done in 60 days," she said. "It takes just six months alone to go through all the processes that the county requires for it to be posted."

Meanwhile, the county increased its contract with the Long Island Crisis Center by \$70,000 to boost training and hiring for substance abuse counselors, McCummings said.

Legis. Joshua Lafazan, a Woodbury independent who caucuses with Democrats and sponsored the hotline and app bills, said he had envisioned a separate number for the substance abuse line. The experts on the other line should be knowledgeable about treatment providers, addiction and insurance. Lafazan said a crisis intervention line could refer to suicide and he wanted "a stand-alone number where we could mark it solely related to addiction."

But McCummings said callers likely would continue to use the 227-TALK number, and could be transferred to a substance abuse specialist. "We don't want to have two separate hotlines, because the residents get confused." That number "has always been a behavioral and substance abuse hotline," she said.

Lafazan said if the county took that route, certified drug counselors must be on hand and be able to text with callers.

Al Perez, deputy commissioner for Information Technology, said the app was in the "final phase of testing." He said developers needed time to make sure the app was secure and that medical information was written accurately. "We'd love to do things much, much faster, but we have to make sure it's absolutely right," Perez said.