

# METRICH focus shifted by overdose cases

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MANSFIELD -- Heroin and pharmaceutical drugs have become the focus of the METRICH Enforcement Unit because of overdoses.

In 2008, Richland County saw 15 accidental, fatal overdoses and two suicides. Of those cases, five involved heroin and four involved prescription drugs.

"It's clearly an objective because of what we've seen from diverted pharmaceuticals and heroin," METRICH Commander Lt. Dino Sgambellone said. "What drives us is a combination of input from the community and various trend data."

For the first time, METRICH has a full-time pharmaceutical investigator. A federal grant pays for the position handled by Darrin Remaley.

Mansfield police Chief Phil Messer told those at Wednesday's annual METRICH luncheon at the Holiday Inn that the crime lab has received more samples of heroin than cocaine this year for the first time.

In 2000, the crime lab got only two or three samples of heroin. So far this year, it has received 199, compared to 168 samples of cocaine.

Ohio Attorney General Richard Cordray has noticed the same trends. He was Wednesday's guest speaker.

"We are seeing a rise in heroin," Cordray said. "We are seeing a rise in fatalities from drug overdoses. It's becoming epidemic in some places."

Messer, who helped found METRICH 23 years ago, said the mission of the regional task force -- to improve the quality of life -- hasn't changed.

"We chose to focus on illegal narcotics and weapons in order to promote safe neighborhoods," Messer said.

METRICH has grown to include 10 counties, representing 42 communities and 600,000 residents. The task force will receive \$368,000 in federal grants.

"Last year at this time, we were working hard to survive," Messer said. "There is a light at the end of the tunnel. Next year looks better for operating dollars."

Cordray said he admired the METRICH approach.

"What you exemplify is exactly what we try to preach, people working collaboratively together. It helps everybody do a better job," the attorney general said. "We're all aiming at the same goals."

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