

More enforcement is one approach

By *JESSICA CUFFMAN*

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MARION - Enforcement is one way to battle the opiate epidemic in Ohio, from arrests to convictions to prison time.

The MARMET Drug Task Force has investigated more cases of opiate abuse than ever before. And unlike other drug problems, which can be traced to dealers from out of town such as Chicago and Detroit, heroin addicts and dealers make trips to Columbus on a daily basis to feed their habits.

It's everywhere.

Having the task force and the crime tips line, however, aids officers in curbing the problem when and where they can.

"It's a scary thing to think today where we would be if we didn't have our task force," supervisor Lt. B.J. Gruber of the police department said.

He and Maj. Aaron Corwin of the sheriff's office run the unit together.

Both said they've seen heroin use expand significantly in the past two years. To battle the drug problem through the community, they're working to step up enforcement efforts such as a roundup of more than 20 drug dealers in late July, preceded by a joint effort of the police department, sheriff's office and Ohio State Highway Patrol to target problem areas in the city, Operation Make Some Noise.

In the weeks following those efforts, dealers packed it up and moved, going back to other cities if they came from out of town, Gruber said.

"It's not worth doing business here," he said. "This is not a good place to sell your drugs."

MARMET officers always are on call, and current work schedules put drug detectives on the streets for about 15 hours of every day, he said.

While increased enforcement efforts contribute to the fight against drugs, for every dealer taken off the streets, Gruber said it feels like five more move in.

To keep the problem from ever developing, officers say parents should talk to their kids.

"I don't want my kids around this," Corwin said.

Warning them about things like Robotripping, a stunt where someone chugs a bottle of cough syrup so they'll hallucinate, is as important as warning them about illegal drugs, Gruber said.

Officers also hear stories about teens at parties tossing bottles of prescription pills and others into a bowl and directing everyone to take a handful. Deterring the problem starts at home, they said - don't wait until the problem is there and there isn't any way to fight it except by calling police.

Most of the tips on drugs the task force hears are from family members of suspects, Corwin said.

"They don't want to get them in trouble, but if that's what it takes to get them help, then they call," he said.

Marion County Common Pleas Court Judge Robert Davidson said there are more than 700 offenders on probation at any given time and probably two-thirds of them have committed drug-related crimes.

What he and Judge William Finnegan do every day is host a drug court, but to gain resources for a specialized docket that would handle such offenses would be impossible. Several more judges would be needed as well as probation officers to have the intensive supervision required for a drug court.

However, for years he has been meeting with some offenders outside of court hearings on a regular basis to help deter drug-related problems. With a tight county budget, that's all that's possible for now.

Marion Municipal Court will be hosting a treatment court for drug and OVI offenders beginning in January.

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