

ALERT ESCALATES ON DRUG MIX : 'TOO MANY DYING'

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As metro Detroit officials braced for what could be a deadly Memorial Day weekend, a dozen **drug** abuse counselors fanned out across the city Thursday to warn users about a fatal **mix** of **drugs** laced with a pain medication that is suspected in the deaths of as many as 33 people in the past week.

With federal agents chasing down leads to the source of the **drugs** and investigators combing through autopsies and toxicology reports, the counselors deployed in hopes of alerting people to the dangers of the fentanyl-laced **drugs** suspected in more than 100 deaths in metro Detroit since September.

In recent days, that number has surged - officials in Wayne County said Thursday 10 **drug** deaths occurred Tuesday, up from four reported a day before - as health officials and police struggled to react to the distribution of a **mix** dealers are marketing as "drop dead" and "suicide packets."

"The idea that it is deadly potent could be a come- **on** for the dyed-in-the-wool **drug** addict," said Dr. Calvin Trent, director of Detroit's Bureau of Substance Abuse, which is part of the city's Health Department.

Another concern is whether less hard-core users of heroin and cocaine will try the fentanyl-added **mix** in search of a stronger high.

"This is not the time to be going to the streets and buying a recreational bag of **drugs** ," Trent said. "This is one of the most serious issues we've dealt with and we're not sure if the community is taking it seriously."

On Thursday afternoon, Edward Aniapam, coordinator of special services for the substance abuse bureau, visited eight Detroit shelters as part of a coordinated effort to pass out information warning about the fatal **mix** .

"We need you to help us spread the word," Aniapam told a group of about 30 people at the Detroit Rescue Mission shelter **on** Third Street. "There are too many people dying. You may think: 'Gimme some of this bad stuff. I'll do just a little bit and it won't kill me.' Please, this is killing people."

Down the street, at the Neighborhood Services Organization shelter, people said word is out about the high-powered **mix** .

"We hear the **drug** is used for cancer," Robert Nesbitt, 56, said as he rolled homemade cigarettes in a tray. "It's genocide, in my opinion. Someone should have spoke up about this a long time ago."

Outside of the shelter, a group of men and women sipped from beer bottles and smoked marijuana before Aniapam approached them.

"Take these flyers, man," he said. "We've got something bad going on ."

'We have some good leads'

As **drug** counselors tried to spread the word, U.S. **Drug** Enforcement Administration officials said Thursday they were tracking information that could lead to the sources of the heroin and cocaine that is mixed with the painkiller, typically given to terminally ill patients. The officials said their investigation could last at least two more weeks.

The source of the **drug** itself, however, is still unknown - possibly a clandestine lab or a rogue pharmacist.

"We have some good leads," said Carolyn Gibson, a DEA spokeswoman. She did not elaborate.

The DEA has been working with its offices in Camden, N.J., Philadelphia and Chicago, where other cases of fentanyl-laced heroin have been identified, in hopes of figuring out whether those cities were supplied from the same source.

Although those cities have experienced problems with fentanyl, the number has paled in comparison with the death toll now being investigated in Detroit.

The DEA first identified fentanyl mixed with other **drugs** in Michigan last November when investigators bought heroin off the street to test it - a practice aimed at monitoring the spread of the **drug** .

The recent surge has been so serious that investigators from the Atlanta-based U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have come to Detroit to try to re-create the events that led to the suspected fentanyl deaths, CDC spokeswoman Bernadette Burden said.

So far, they have not had anything to report.

Teresa Blossom, a Wayne County spokeswoman, said there have been 33 **drug** -related deaths in Wayne County since May 18. Although toxicology reports, which take weeks to complete, will be needed to determine how many are fentanyl-related, the majority of the 106 **drug** deaths in Wayne County from September through March were linked to fentanyl mixed with heroin or cocaine. That leads officials to believe the recent surge is related to fentanyl as well.

Blossom said the county would not release the names of the people who have died, because the investigation is ongoing.

Deaths from the **drug** are not just a Wayne County or Detroit issue, however.

Oakland County chief forensic toxicologist Gary Kunsman said Thursday the county has tentatively identified 28 fentanyl-related deaths since late September. In Macomb County, medical examiner Daniel Spitz said he has seen more fatal **drug** overdoses in recent weeks, but so far just one has been linked to fentanyl, and it wasn't mixed with either heroin or cocaine.

John Roach, a spokesman for the Wayne County Sheriff's Office, said the majority of the special operations unit is investigating the suspected fentanyl cases.

"Much of that is interviewing people we know or have contacted before that are known heroin users," he said. "It's a street-level approach we are taking."

Quick treatment is crucial

Officials said those who overdose can be saved if they get to an emergency room immediately.

"This can be treated: The key is looking for signs that include dizziness, trouble breathing or an inability to walk and talk," said Michele Reid, medical director of the Detroit-Wayne County Community Mental Health Agency and chairwoman of the newly created Wayne County fentanyl work group.

Asked why anyone would willingly take the more powerful **drug**, Dr. Michael Boyle, medical director of Henry Ford Health System's Maplegrove Center, a West Bloomfield **drug** treatment facility, said simply: "To feel good."

"An addict will go to any lengths to feel good," he said.

And the knowledge that a **drug** has a potentially deadly ingredient will not stop addicts, particularly if that ingredient promises an even better high.

"There are two mechanisms in play," Boyle said. "One is denial: 'It will not happen to me.' The other is thinking: 'They took too much. I'm going to take less.' "

Getting the word out to users is not an issue, he said.

"Heroin addicts are aware better than you or I what's going **on** out there," Boyle said.

For more information **on drug** abuse, visit www.drugfreedetroit.org or www.semca.org. A statewide substance abuse hotline is available at 888-736-0253. Contact BEN SCHMITT at 313-223-4296 or bcschmitt@freepress.com.

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