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Lynn faces cutback in outreach funding as opioid deaths rise

By **Laura Crimaldi** GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 27, 2017

LYNN — Opioids are believed to have claimed 11 lives in Lynn in 2017 as of Friday, more than double the number of fatal overdoses recorded during the same period last year.

At the same time, the city is confronting a funding emergency that threatens a key program established to fight the problem.

Governor Charlie Baker slashed \$150,000 that goes to pay for a clinician and a case manager who reach out to hundreds of people in Lynn who overdose on opioids annually and help them get treatment, police said.

The cut was part of [\\$98 million that Baker unilaterally carved from the state budget](#) in December to close a funding gap.

Without the money, Lynn Deputy Police Chief Lenny Desmarais said, the department's behavioral health unit will lose those two positions by the end of June. The clinician and the case manager processed 531 substance abuse and mental health referrals last year.

"It's not looking promising considering how bad the heroin overdose problem is," Desmarais said in a recent interview. "They're trying to save the people who are most at risk of fatally overdosing. And if we don't have them, that outreach isn't going to be there."

Baker spokesman Brendan Moss said the governor has boosted funding to fight the opioid epidemic by 50 percent since taking office, saying the administration values its relationship with local officials and looks forward to continuing to work with them to combat the crisis.

Baker's office also said the state awarded Lynn police \$489,000 in December to pay for staffing and nearly \$190,000 last month to fight youth and gang violence.

Treatment providers in Lynn get more than \$3.1 million in state funding and the city receives another \$285,000 for prevention, plus nearly \$13,000 for naloxone, the overdose reversal drug, the administration said.

Desmarais said Lynn is grateful for the help, but the police grants prohibit the department from using the money on the behavioral health unit. “None of that could be used to fund the case manager and the clinician,” he said.

Lynn recorded 444 opioid overdoses last year, including 50 fatalities, police said. In 2015, the city had 348 overdoses and the same number of deaths, figures show.

Opioids are believed to have [killed nearly 2,000 people last year in Massachusetts](#), health officials said.

The recent opioid fatalities in Lynn shared few commonalities, striking men and women in their 20s through 50s, authorities said.

Police are looking for other revenue sources and may use money from an asset forfeiture fund to keep the program going, Desmarais said. State Representative Brendan Crighton, a Lynn Democrat, said he wants the funding restored.

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Lenny Desmarais, Lynn deputy police chief

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“We’re going to keep fighting for it,” he said.

The clinician and the case manager from Eliot Community Human Services moved into the Lynn Police Department in July 2014 and began reaching out to opioid overdose victims with \$250,000 in grant funding from the state attorney general’s office, Desmarais said.

Licensed social worker Erin Zapata and case manager Shelby Souther get referrals from officers, social services agencies, homeless shelters, the US Department of Veterans Affairs, and other sources.

If the person seeking help is in custody, Zapata and Souther said, they try to meet at the police station. Otherwise, they telephone overdose victims or mail a letter offering assistance.

“Our approach is just to say, ‘How can we be helpful?’ ” Zapata said. “We are happy to meet the individual wherever they’re at.”

Last year, they screened 219 people for services, 40 percent of whom engaged in treatment, program figures show. Some overdose victims want to go to detox, while others seek long-term treatment or medications to help kick their habit, Zapata said.

People who don't plan to give up drugs are referred to programs aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with their addiction, she said.

On some occasions when Zapata and Souther call, they reach family members and find them support groups or get them naloxone.

"Some people are very surprised when we call and are very thankful because they're not aware that we're here, and they're not aware that the police officers care about them and they want to make sure these individuals are going to be safe and hopefully get help," Zapata said.

One man who overdosed in Lynn last month said he called the program after he received a letter offering help. Souther connected him with counseling and he's taking medication to stay clean, he said.

"She wanted to get me help right away," said the man, who asked to be identified only by his first name, Juan, because of safety concerns. "The program works."

Other efforts to combat the opioid problem will continue in Lynn regardless of what happens to the police initiative, which has funding through 2019 for a third worker who concentrates on jail diversion.

Bridgewell, which has an outpatient clinic in Lynn, has programs concentrating on hot spots for overdoses and people who overdose repeatedly, said Wendy Kent, who directs the organization's behavioral health and prevention services.

Next month, they plan to staff the emergency department at Lynn's Union Hospital with on-call recovery coaches, she said.

"Everybody is trying something different and we're just trying to find more avenues for connecting with people in need," Kent said. "If the behavioral health unit does lose its funding, it just creates another gap that we have to fill."

City police officers and firefighters also carry naloxone, saving 95 percent of overdose patients last year, figures show.

“If we didn’t have this program, who knows?” said Lynn Fire Captain Joseph Zukas, director of the department’s emergency medical services. “I would hope that we had a part in saving these lives.”