



North Shore officials work together on opioid crisis

By Arianna MacNeill Staff Writer

PEABODY — Officials from three North Shore cities convened Thursday to talk about what their communities are doing — and what they can do together — to fight an ever-changing, deadly issue — the opioid crisis.

But as work continues and new strategies are put in place, opioid-related overdoses and deaths are up this year in Salem and Lynn over last year, according to Wendy Kent, director of Behavioral Health and Prevention Programs at Bridgewell.

Mayors, law enforcement officials and school administrators from Salem, Peabody and Lynn all met at the Bridgewell headquarters in Peabody to discuss the issue with experts, and what new strategies can be pursued on substance abuse prevention programs under the Massachusetts Opioid Abuse Prevention Collaborative.

“We’ve been doing this work and addressing this issue for eight or nine years now because the problem continues to escalate,” Kent said following the meeting. “As we learn more along the way, we’re constantly regrouping and reorganizing.”

Thursday’s efforts focused on different areas the three communities can work on, including outreach, making it easier for addicts to enter treatment, working at a “higher level” in communities, and using data to move forward with strategies and planning, according to Kent.

Each of the three cities has strengths in addressing the crisis, she said. Peabody works well with offering prevention while Salem is strong in reaching out to people after they overdose. Lynn’s strength is in data collection.

Members from each community split into groups to brainstorm different strategies. These will be compiled into a new action plan, Kent said, and each community will soon have a copy to work from.

While the state Department of Public Health wants cities and towns to strive for actions based on data, Kent noted the crisis often changes quickly, and communities “have to be creative.”



“It’s not enough to just look at the number of overdoses and fatalities and understand the problem,” she said.

For example, Lynn saw a level number of overdoses for the first 5-1/2 months this year compared to last year, Kent said. But then there was a spike, and now the number of overdoses there are projected to be higher than 2016.

This can be due to different strains of opioids people are using.

“That’s something we can’t control,” Kent said. “It’s dramatically increased in purity and potency. This is what we’re up against — the product.”

Though a complex issue, local officials found the day productive.

“It’s very worthwhile,” said Peabody police Chief Tom Griffin. “We have to put our best efforts forward to get this going in the right direction.”

Outreach is critical, Griffin said, including families, parents and youth. Some ways to reach young people may not just be through school, but also through school sports and faith-based activities.

“We want to make sure we get on top of it and reverse things,” Griffin said. While opioid-related deaths may be leveling off in his city, it isn’t good enough to just be level with last year. “We put in a lot of time and effort to reverse things,” he said.

In terms of outreach, Peabody Mayor Ted Bettencourt cited the Healthy Peabody Collaborative, which works with youth on drug prevention. Other efforts include the student-based health center at Peabody High, which offers addiction treatment and mental health counseling. Going door-to-door is another effort the city has put forward — talking to people who may be directly effected by the crisis.

“I think certainly any mayor or town manager has grave concerns about the opioid epidemic in our communities,” Bettencourt said. “Certainly Peabody is no different than every other community. It has been touched by heartbreak caused by opioid addiction and deaths.”