



Our view: Many tools needed to slow fentanyl's march

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“Death can come quick with fentanyl. It’s such a dangerous product.” — Mark Kennard, director of community services for the Lynnfield-based substance abuse treatment provider Bridgewell

It was just last week that state officials were sounding a hopeful note in the fight against opioid addiction. Opioid-related overdose deaths were down 5 percent in the first six months of 2017 when compared to the same period last year. Gov. Charlie Baker called the decline in fatalities “positive.”

Then came Labor Day weekend in Gloucester.

Six people in the city overdosed in a 24-hour period, with one woman dying in an Addison Gilbert Hospital bathroom Friday night. If not for the rescue medication naloxone, commonly known as Narcan, the death toll would likely have been worse.

Police have linked the overdoses to a batch of fentanyl that is making its way through the city. The synthetic opioid is much more powerful and dangerous than even heroin or oxycodone. It has been linked to more than 75 percent of the state’s recent overdose deaths.

Much of the state’s attention has gone toward treating addicts and warning opioid users of the dangers they face, and rightly so. With the continued emergence of fentanyl and its even deadlier cousin, carfentanyl, it is becoming clear that more must be done to get the drugs off the streets.

The spate of overdoses in Gloucester last weekend shocked even city officials, who have long been at the forefront of the national fight against opioid addiction.

“I’m devastated and I’m mad,” Mayor Sefatia Romeo Theken said over the weekend. “We have reached out, we trained, we have seemed to be ahead of the epidemic. Now fentanyl is not just needle users. They lace the synthetic Percocet and sell the pills.”

The dangers of fentanyl are not limited to those addicted to opioids. An Essex police detective needed to be decontaminated last month after coming into contact with the drug during an arrest. Also last month, three Chelsea officers had to be hospitalized when they had trouble breathing after coming into contact with the drug at the scene of a traffic accident. Now, all of that city’s officers are required to wear masks, gloves and a hooded suit whenever they suspect the drug is present.

“This is just a constant reminder of our concerns in law enforcement and for public safety when dealing with substances such as fentanyl,” Essex police Chief Peter Silva said after the incident in his town. “People don’t realize how powerful it can be.”

Everyone involved in the fight against opioid addiction — state officials, health care and treatment providers, first responders and private citizens — should be proud of the efforts made over the past few years. More money is being put into treatment programs, life-saving Narcan is being put into more hands, and the stigma of abuse is fading as more people realize addiction is a disease and not a moral failing.

All of that work will come to naught if the flow of fentanyl can't be stopped. Often, Narcan isn't enough to reverse the effects of a fentanyl overdose. Fentanyl kills people before they can be treated. It puts caregivers and first responders at risk.

A large portion of the effort to turn back fentanyl falls to the federal government, particularly in pushing China to shut down the shadowy labs that make much of the drug sold on U.S. streets.

At the state level, it's clear that officials must continue to emphasize enforcement as part of the overall strategy for dealing with the opioid epidemic. We support Gov. Baker's proposal to stiffen penalties for those convicted of dealing the drug in the Bay State.

Baker has filed legislation that would allow prosecutors to charge drug dealers with manslaughter if their sales lead to the death of a user. The approach is similar to the way the state treats someone who drives drunk and causes the death of another driver or pedestrian.

"When illegal drug distribution causes a death, laws that were designed to punish the act are inadequate to recognize the seriousness of the resulting harm," Baker said.

Only quick, determined work on many fronts — from treatment to enforcement to international diplomacy — will ensure the positive ground made in the fight against opioid addiction isn't lost. Otherwise a half-dozen overdoses in one city in 24 hours will seem like small potatoes.