

Fentanyl in DougCo: 10 overdoses, 5 deaths



Douglas County Sheriff Tony Spurlock, left, talks about the fentanyl crisis as county commissioners Abe Laydon and George Teal listen. | Douglas County/YouTube



By Mike McKibbin/NewsBreak Denver | May 4, 2022

[DOUGLAS COUNTY, COLO.] The battle to fight the fentanyl crisis in Douglas County will take work at the local, state and federal levels was one of the messages at a Tuesday night town hall meeting in Castle Rock. The county also needs more addiction counseling and treatment programs.

Fentanyl, an opioid painkiller many times more potent than heroin, is typically prescribed to treat severe pain. Used since the 1950s, it now frequently appears as an illegal street drug mixed with other narcotics.

County law enforcement officials, a doctor and school officials participated in the event hosted by the county commissioners.

Sheriff Tony Spurlock said his deputies had responded to 10 fentanyl-related overdoses and five deaths linked to drugs laced with fentanyl so far this year.

"They're lacing cocaine, heroin and other drugs with fentanyl dust and killing our citizens," he added.

18th Judicial District Attorney John Kellner said a regional drug task force seized over 110,000 fentanyl pills last December, indicted 19 people, and seized 28 firearms and other weapons.

Parker Police Chief Jim Tsurapas' department responded to a "drastic" increase in calls related to fentanyl. Between April 2021 and March 2022, Parker officers handled 85 fentanyl-related cases compared to 25 a year earlier, he added.

Lone Tree Police Chief Kirk Wilson called fentanyl "100% more powerful than morphine and highly addictive."

"It's impacting our transient population, too," he said. "These folks just a few years ago were productive citizens and now they're on fentanyl and living on the streets."

People seek relief with fentanyl

Dr. Eric Lung, chief medical officer at Sky Ridge Medical Center in Lone Tree, said some people take fentanyl when they self-medicate. He noted that long-term injuries or pain conditions could cause them to seek relief when prescription medications do not seem to help.

"It's a slippery slope and can lead to people seeking more powerful illegal ways to soothe themselves," Lung said.

Kellner said fentanyl is cheap and easy to make, and drug cartels like it because all they need is a small lab. The drug is made into small bricks and smuggled across borders for distribution, he added.

"One brick or kilo can get \$30,000 and once they mix it with fillers, it can sell for \$1 million," Kellner said. "They make different pills for different markets and 2 milligrams of this stuff can kill you."

Kellner also said the Denver area is over-saturated with fentanyl, so the price for one pill dropped from \$10 an ounce to around \$3.

Testing difficult due to pill potency

Spurlock said most testing processes for suspicious pills are hazardous for the person doing the testing.

"We've had jail officers get contaminated when they take baggies of fentanyl off inmates who were trying to smuggle them in," he stated.

A bill in the Colorado legislature to address the fentanyl crisis could provide fentanyl testing strips. But Kellner said the best way to get rid of suspect drugs is to contact a law enforcement agency. People should not throw them down the toilet or sink due to their potency.

Officials urged people to contact state and federal elected leaders to direct more resources to stop the flow of fentanyl ingredients from as far away as China and into the U.S, mainly at the southern border.

Commissioner Lora Thomas noted the state received around \$450 million in American Recovery Plan Act money to spend through nonprofits across the state on behavioral health issues.

Commissioner Abe Laydon said the county would receive \$4.9 million from the state's share of the opioid settlement to treat drug addiction.

