

[print](#)

Agencies work to curb rise of prescription drug abuse

by Emily Adams

09.30.12 - 12:00 am

They separate families, end careers, damage communities — and yet they are perfectly legal when used as directed.

Prescription drugs are an anomaly in the world of controlled substances. While often used to treat legitimate medical conditions, abuse of these pills is the fastest growing drug problem in the United States and across Alabama, according to the National Governor's Association.

Over the last decade, Talladega and St. Clair counties have seen a noticeable increase in the number of people who deal, use or form addictions to prescription pills.

“It's rampant,” said District Judge Robert Minor, who presides over the St. Clair County Family Drug Court. “There has been a huge, huge boom, especially among young people.”

To combat the problem, state and local agencies are increasing efforts to help those who are addicted and educate those who are not. Starting this month, Gov. Robert Bentley is partnering with six other states in a yearlong initiative to develop programs to reduce abuse. Cooperation between all agencies is the only way to effectively impact the issue, said Fran Shaddix, residential substance abuse program director at Caradale Lodge in Sylacauga.

“It is a problem that we all have to pay more attention to,” Shaddix said. “It's going to take everybody working together on the same page — law enforcement, pharmacies, physicians, mental health, rehabilitation facilities — and even then it's not going to go away. At best, we can hope to help those who are already addicted and cut the number of those that become addicted in the future.”

Accessibility is a major factor in the rise of prescription drug crimes, Minor said, and increases in prescriptions in the legal drug market contribute to the illegal market.

The Talladega County Drug and Violent Crime Task Force confiscated nearly 51,000 pills last year. Task Force commander Jason Murray said while their current emphasis is methamphetamines, prescription drugs are never far behind.

“Fifty-one thousand is a lot of pills,” Murray said. “We see more meth because that's where our focus is, but usually meth is taken in conjunction with some other narcotic. If you're on meth, you're going to have a Valium or Xanax to take the edge off.”

Among the most common pills seen in this area are Hydrocodone and Oxycodone variants like Methadone, OxyContin and Vicodin, and benzodiazepines like Xanax. Murray said many people are desensitized to the abuse of these drugs because they are legal and easy to get.

“People get prescription drugs for no reason every day,” he said. “It’s really easy to go to the doctor or emergency room and complain about back pain. A lot of times people don’t even take their prescription; they just sell it. And when you can buy somebody’s prescription for \$50 and turn it into \$500, that’s easy money.”

Shaddix said selling becomes as much of an addiction as using.

“You have people who are paying their car payments and their house notes with that money,” she said. “That’s a lot of income for somebody.”

Whatever the reward is for dealers, the consequences are always much greater, Murray said.

“Our main goal is to get these people in prison,” he said. “They’re the ones reaping the benefits of other people’s misery, so we want to get those people off the streets. Drug dealing is not a victimless crime as it is often portrayed as. Because of the drugs, the property crimes increase, crimes against persons increase, bad checks increase, because most people that have a habit of writing bad checks also have a drug problem. So it affects everybody.”

While prison is a possible outcome for possession charges, there are also ways to get help. St. Clair County has grant-funded family, juvenile and criminal drug courts designed for first-time offenders whose offenses are directly related to their addiction.

The voluntary programs, if completed, can reunite parents with their children, get charges dropped and ultimately save money for the prison system, but it’s not an easy ride, Minor said.

“You have an early curfew, weekly drug tests, recovery classes,” Minor said. “Anybody can fake it for a while, but to be successful in the program, which is a minimum of a year, you really have to address your issues.”

Minor said the drug courts have seen tremendous results.

“In the family court, I would say more than 80 percent graduate,” he said. “All three courts are incredibly worthwhile. For the families, you’re making a better life for a child, and on the criminal side, you’re putting lives back together and saving money. Treatment is less costly than prison, and it also makes you much less likely to reoffend.”

Talladega County is the only county in the state without a drug court program. Murray said he would rather see a deferred prosecution program, if anything.

“When I was in a different county, we actually caught dope on people walking out of drug court,” he said. “Based on my experience, I’m not a fan of drug court, but I know some programs are more successful than others.”

Other options for addicts include inpatient or outpatient substance abuse programs like Caradale Lodge. The 14 to 21 day program provides medical detoxification, therapy, education classes and routines that help restore lives to the point where a person can go to outpatient therapy, Shaddix said.

“Addicts rationalize their actions by saying they’re only hurting themselves,” she said. “We try to show them they are hurting their children, their spouses, their communities, their job. When they come here, they don’t care about the consequences, so it’s about learning how to care again.”

Shaddix said about half of their 120 clients a year are prescription drug addicts, many of whom never actually abused a drug.

“A lot of people who come here were not buying off the street,” she said. “They’re not selling or stealing drugs. They didn’t want to be addicted. They were prescribed a pill and took it as the doctor directed, and when they stopped getting it, they realized they had a problem.”

While they see some clients multiple times, others reach recovery.

“We’ve had several in the last week call and say they are maintaining their sobriety, and that helps me come to work every day,” Shaddix said.

For those who need to dispose of prescription pills, Murray said pills should never be flushed down the toilet, but can be brought to the Task Force or taken to a DEA pick-up location.

Shaddix said she hopes for a better way to monitor prescription drug use in the future, before the problem escalates any further.

“If something doesn’t change and people don’t become aware — we’re becoming a nation of pill takers,” she said. “We’re all expected to do more with less, and yet the sick people don’t stop coming. It’s a scary thought.”