

'IT'S A BAND-AID,' NOT A CURE



Cheryl Groves, (bottom) a volunteer with the N.C. Harm Reduction Coalition, Shelly Martinez and Carlos Ramirez talk with the manager of a hotel on Market Street on Saturday about providing kits containing naloxone, also known as Narcan. The drug reverses overdoses of opioids, including heroin. 'It's not fixing anybody or curing their disease, but it's keeping them alive until they get the help they need,' Groves said, Photo by Matt Born

N.C. Harm Reduction Coalition aims to get heroin overdose kits into more hands

By Adam Wagner

Adam.Wagner@StarNewsOnline.com

Cheryl Groves hears the stories of heroin addiction everywhere she goes and knows at least two people who have died of overdoses and two more who have, in recent months, lived through them.

Now Groves, dissatisfied with officials' response, is taking action against what she calls the "epidemic" of heroin use in Southeastern North Carolina by distributing kits containing the overdose-

ONLINE

For more information about naloxone, also known as Narcan, and how it works to reverse drug overdoses, visit the N.C. Harm Reduction Coalition's website at www.nchrc.org/harm-reduction/naloxone-101

reversal drug naloxone through the N.C. Harm Reduction Coalition. From 2010 to 2012, the number of deaths attributed to heroin overdoses in North Carolina increased 289.5 percent, from 38 to 148, according to the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services.

"It was the frustration of, 'What could somebody do?' It just kind of fell on me because it seems like

HOW IT WORKS

Narcan blocks the body's opioid receptors, allowing the central nervous and respiratory systems of someone who has overdosed to return to normal.

HOW TO RESERVE A KIT

- To reserve an overdose rescue kit from the N.C. Harm Reduction Coalition, text Cheryl Groves at 910-599-4361 or call the coalition at 336-543-8050. The coalition has 26 contractors throughout the state, including Wilmington, Rocky Mount and Lumberton.
- The kit contains naloxone, also known as Narcan, which rapidly reverses the effects of narcotics.

OVERDOSES

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nobody wants to do anything," she said.

Groves, who is based in Rocky Point, and another Harm Reduction Coalition worker based in Wilmington are the only people other than EMS agencies and hospitals using the drug in the region, although the Wilmington Police Department will likely have it in all patrol cars by the end of the year.

Where EMS and law enforcement use naloxone when responding to a likely overdose, Groves and her compatriots try to put their kits - which include two clean intermuscular needles and two milliliters of naloxone - in the hands of users and dealers so the drug is on hand when and if an emergency occurs.

"It's a Band-Aid. It's not fixing anybody or curing their disease, but it's keeping them alive until they get the help they need," Groves said, alluding to the fact that addiction can't be treated if a user is dead.

Naloxone, often known by its manufacturer name Narcan, works by blocking the body's opioid receptors, allowing a person's central nervous system and respiratory systems to quickly return to working function.

"It's amazing to watch it work, it really is. It's pretty much immediate," said Brian Watts, Brunswick County's emergency management director. Patients go from not breathing to awake and alert, Watts added, but are likely to projectile vomit.

Since Jan. 1, Brunswick EMS units have used Narcan 97 times, Watts said. The Brunswick units also have a policy that they will use Narcan if they come upon a patient who is unconscious for unknown reasons because the drug only affects narcotics.

In New Hanover County, EMS units used the drug 343 times from September 2013 to September 2014. The New Hanover County units use Narcan any time an overdose is suspected, said a New



Cheryl Groves, a volunteer with the N.C. Harm Reduction Coalition, walks along Market Street carrying several naloxone kits Saturday. Groves and her compatriots try to put their kits - which include two clean intermuscular needles and two milliliters of naloxone - in the hands of users and dealers so the drug is on hand when and if an emergency occurs. Photo by Matt Born

Hanover Regional Medical Center spokeswoman.

Naloxone and law enforcement

By the end of this year, WPD will likely become the first major local law enforcement agency to carry naloxone in its cars, said Jonathan Poplin, the WPD gang detective who has headed the effort since last November. Equipping WPD's 264 sworn officers with naloxone will cost less than \$5,000, Poplin said.

The drug isn't carried in the patrol cars of the sheriff's offices in Brunswick, New Hanover and Pender counties.

Getting naloxone kits in the hands of law enforcement officers has been easier in Georgia, said Leilani Attilio, a coordinator for the N.C. Harm Reduction Coalition.

Five Georgia law enforcement agencies have started carrying naloxone since the state's medical amnesty law,



The kits being handed out by Cheryl Groves contain instructions, two vials of naloxone and two syringes. Photo by Alan Cradick

which also expanded the availability of the drug, was signed into law on April 24. By comparison, WPD would

be the third agency in North Carolina to carry the drug even though the Tar Heel State's amnesty law passed

on April 3, 2013, more than a year before Georgia's. Part of the reason for that, Attilio said, is the advocacy of Tanya Smith, a Holly Springs, Ga., police lieutenant whose 20-year-old daughter died of a meth overdose in 2013. Taylor Smith, Tanya's daughter, had only started to kick heroin, Smith told the Cherokee Tribune earlier this year.

Funding has also been a barrier, Attilio added, especially with intranasal doses of naloxone costing about \$25 apiece.

The coalition, here

In about a month, Groves passed out the entirety of her first shipment of 75 kits from the coalition, almost entirely by word of mouth.

"That's with me hardly knowing anybody," she said. "It's a small nucleus, but the word gets out."

More than 4,000 naloxone kits have been passed out in

North Carolina since August 2013, when the N.C. Harm

Reduction Coalition's medical director put in a standing order for them. So far, 144 people have self-reported being saved by the kits, Attilio said. Still, the number of reported saves is likely low, Attilio said, because of drug users' mistrust of people outside their immediate social networks.

While many of the users are given the kits for free, the coalition is funded entirely on private grants and donations, so any money someone can pay for a kit is much appreciated.

"We would love donations from people," Attilio said, "but if the person has to choose between paying for transportation, gas, electric bills or food that night, we'll just give them the kit. We don't want money to be a barrier."

Adam Wagner: 343-2096
On Twitter: @AdamWagner1990