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LA-MSID holds opioid crisis discussion

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By MELISSA?BILL (news@breezenewspapers.com) , Lehigh Acres Citizen

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Lehigh residents in need of services related to substance abuse issues may find help a little closer to home in the future.

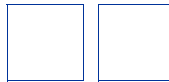
The Lehigh Acres Municipal Services Improvement District hosted an information/organization meeting for the establishment of SalusCare services and operations in Lehigh Acres.

The luncheon meeting took place on Jan. 29 and brought together local agencies to discuss the current opioid crisis and health related issues.

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Commissioner Michael J. Welch opened the meeting and spoke about LA-MSID's role in the community and its desire to create a more centralized effort on the opioid epidemic forefront.

"We are here today to discuss the problems we are seeing with opiate addiction here in Lehigh as well as Lee County and talk about ways we can address the problem," said Welch.

Some of the organizations and agencies in attendance of the meeting included: Lee County Sheriff's Office, Lehigh Acres Community Services, Lehigh Regional Medical Center, Lee Health Board, Community Senior Services and SalusCare Directors. Representativity for both Senator Kathleen Passidomo and Lizbeth Benacquisto's office also sat in on the discussion.

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According to Stacey Cook-Hawk, President & Chief Executive Officer at SalusCare, presently about 20 to 25 percent of their patients come from the Lehigh area and many of those individuals aren't able to get back and forth to treatment due to lack of transportation.

"We want to have a presence out here in Lehigh Acres. Addiction numbers are rising throughout the county and here locally. That's why we are here today to talk about what we can bring to Lehigh," said Cook-Hawk.

Doctors and administrators at Lehigh Regional Medical Center are seeing a rise in fatalities.

"We treat about 30 overdoses during any given month and have had about five or six deaths within the past few months due to opioid use," said Gary C. Bell, Chief Executive officer at Lehigh Regional Medical Center.

According to Bell, safe discharges of these patients is another concern.

"We get them stabilized and then have to eventually send them back out onto the streets with no follow care in place," said Bell.

According to Lehigh Regional's Medical Director of Emergency Services, Dr. Joe Lemmons, what compounds the overdose problem is the new synthetics that are being made in people's garages.

"With these synthetics, people don't know how much opiate it contains or what other substances are in these pills," said Lemmons. "It can shut down the respiratory system completely or cause kidney failure, leaving the person on dialysis for the rest of their life."

News organizations nationwide have dubbed one of the newest dangerous opioid mixtures "gray death," which is blamed for overdoses in Alabama, Georgia, Florida and Ohio, as well as other states. The substance is a combination of several opioids including heroin, fentanyl, carfentanil.

According to Lee County School's District 5 Vice Chairman, Pamela LaRiviere, the school system is also seeing the effects on the children who live in households with opioid abuse.

"Some are having to live with grandparents or going to foster homes, because the parents are in just no shape to take care of them," said LaRiviere.

A spokesperson from the Lee County Sheriff's Narcotics Unit spoke about successful initiatives in places such as Manatee County, which has seen a 60 percent drop in deaths and overdoses from last year. Law enforcement has cracked down on dealers and stepped up rehabilitation programs such as Recovery Pod at the Manatee County Jail.

Other initiatives are coming from a bill currently before the Senate. The bill being heard by the Senate Health Policy Committee would limit the majority of opioid prescriptions to a three-day supply.

"This bill will help to limit the amount of oxy prescribed upon release from the hospital, which can stop the addiction before it starts," explains Therese Everly, secretary of Health System Board of Directors.

The next step in the initiative planning is for SalusCare to work with other agencies to put together a plan on ways to tackle the area's opioid abuse issue through treatment, after-care, mental health diagnosis and counseling.

"You need to think out-of-the-box and find new ways to deal with an old problem. Then it has a much better chance of getting approved by the legislature for funding," said Welch.

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