

A Sheriff's View

Dave Phalen | Sheriff | Fairfield County, Ohio



Tackling Opiate-Related Crime

Dave Phalen has been in law enforcement for 40 years, starting as a police officer in Washington, D.C. Since 2001, he's been the sheriff of Fairfield County, where he's noticed an alarming rise in crime in recent years—a rise he attributes to growing heroin addiction. When he became sheriff, the county's two jails housed an average of 100 prisoners a day. Today, they average 250.

Along with other county officials, Sheriff Phalen has searched for solutions to the growing problem of opiate-related crime. Since 2007, that solution has included Suboxone.

“ When I was with the Columbus police department in the late 1970s, drugs were more specific to geographic areas, typically the poorer, inner city communities. But once crack cocaine hit, with crack houses and drive-by shootings, it moved outside those areas and spread throughout the community. It was a big shift in terms of drug addiction and related criminal activity.

What I've seen in Fairfield County, although it's different, is that dramatic. Since 2003, we've had an explosion of opiate and heroin addiction in our county. Most of it comes out of Afghanistan through the Mexican borders. Columbus is now a source city and it's become relatively inexpensive. You can get a balloon of heroin for as cheap as \$8.

Many people start with Oxycontin, Vicodin and other prescription medication. But at some point it gets too expensive. They're spending \$45 to \$60 for each pill, chewing 10 pills a day, and they can't afford it anymore so they switch to heroin.

In 2003, we started noticing spikes in our jail population. Since then, it has more than doubled, particularly among the women. Ten years ago, we had 8 to 10 female prisoners. Now we have 55. The other thing we noticed was a

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disproportionate number of prisoners who needed treatment for addiction.

Today, well over 50 percent of our prisoners are addicted to opiates or heroin. They seem to be a higher need population because of health issues. We have to treat them for withdrawal, which leads to higher medical expenses.

We also noticed spikes in crime that corresponded with the rise of opiate addiction. About 85 percent of our theft-related offenses are to support

heroin and opiate addiction. They're shoplifting, breaking into cars and burglarizing homes.

I first heard about Suboxone a couple years ago at a luncheon where a doctor was talking about the success they'd had using it to treat opiate dependence. We don't administer Suboxone here at the jail, but we have seen the effects through our drug court. It's cut down on our jail days because the participants are diverted into the drug court program instead of coming here.

It costs \$46 a day to house a prisoner and \$60 a day to house them out of county. Every day someone's not in jail saves us money. Anytime you have a tool that works as well as Suboxone, you're going to be light years ahead.

Everything I've seen and heard about Suboxone has been positive. Anytime you can treat someone who's addicted to drugs, it helps everyone. When we have fewer prisoners and less crime, our job is easier. ”