

Editorial: We'll work on finding a way forward on the heroin epidemic

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David Holthaus is WCPO.com managing editor for opinion and engagement. This was written on behalf of the WCPO editorial board.

We are in the midst of a crisis that, in terms of fatalities, rivals the AIDS epidemic.

It's heroin.

Make no mistake. This is an epidemic. People are, quite literally, dying in the streets. And our community is at the center of what has become a national calamity.

We've seen and heard the stories, stories that get more shocking each week. We must do more than shake our heads and say something needs to be done.

So, WCPO has invited a group of people who are intimately familiar with the heroin problem, either by working on it every day, by being personally affected by it, or both. Together, we want to work on figuring out how we as a community can best respond to this epidemic.

Here's who they are:

Ann Barnum, vice president, community strategies, Interact for Health

Mary Haag, CEO, Prevention First

Dr. Mike Kalfas, physician active in heroin treatment

Dan Meloy, public safety director, Colerain Township

Jason Merrick, direction of addiction services, Kenton County

Colleen Perry, parent

Anita Prater, department director, Brighton Center Recovery Center for Women

Dr. Lakshmi Sammarco, Hamilton County coroner

Bill Sefton, parent, co-founder, H2O advocacy group

Kim Sefton, parent, co-founder, H2O advocacy group

Tom Synan, police chief, Newtown, Ohio

Jim Thaxton, health educator, Three Rivers District Health Department ; coordinator, Heroin Impact Response Task Force

Steve Walkenhorst, vice president of patient services, Center for Addiction Treatment

Erin Winstanley, assistant professor of psychiatry, University of Cincinnati

They've agreed to work with us through 2016 to focus on the problem of heroin and prescription painkillers through editorials, news stories, op-eds from contributors and more. We'll use our digital, broadcast and social media platforms to get the word out.

Many of these people have volunteered their time with the Hamilton County Heroin Coalition and the Northern Kentucky Heroin Impact Response to create those action plans. It is work we hope to build on.

They're among many who've devoted their professional and personal lives to understanding and working on a problem that is devastating families, damaging lives and jeopardizing futures.

We don't hold any illusions that we are going to "solve" the heroin problem. It's a complex issue that demands coordination and understanding among doctors, police, judges, treatment professionals, counselors, legislators and families. But we can identify possible ways forward and advocate for them.

And we can raise awareness about a problem that requires a sustained community response if it is ever going to get better.