

Sheriff unveils plan to create medical detox unit for heroin users at Hamilton Co. Justice Center

Commissioners considering the proposal Monday



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CINCINNATI — The Hamilton County Justice Center could become one of the first jails in the state to allow inmates who are chronic heroin users to detox from the drug with medical help.

County commissioners will consider a more than \$500,000 plan Monday that would create an 18-bed chemical detox unit on the third floor of the Sycamore Street jail.

It's a proposal Sheriff Jim Neil and Major Charmaine McGuffey have been working on for more than a year now— one they say can save lives. Inmates enter jails across the country addicted to heroin and die from medical complications in jail while they detox without help.

“What we’re currently doing is not working so we need to step up our game,” Neil said.

A chemical detox usually lasts between five and seven days, experts say. It’s when medical providers give the patient medications to address each symptom associated with the drug withdrawal to ease the pain, and then taper them off those drugs.

“They’re not your typical drugs like Tylenol or Ibuprofen,” said McGuffey, head of the Hamilton County Justice Center. “They are actual drugs that will allow your body to still get that same kind of stimulus but less and less and less of it so that as you’re withdrawing, you don’t feel like you’re going to die.”

There’s no option like that at the Hamilton County Justice Center right now or at most other jails in the state, which means inmates suffer through withdrawal symptoms on their own.

“They stay in their cells a lot because you’re too sick to come out. The other inmates tend to help them with their detoxing process,” McGuffey said.

Become a WCPO Insider to read about the plan, watch an exclusive video tour of the space where jail officials want to build the detox unit and learn why its so difficult to detox from heroin without medical help.