

WEST SPARTA

Three charged with selling meth

WEST SPARTA — Three people who allegedly possessed and sold methamphetamine in Livingston County have been arrested on felony charges, Sheriff Thomas J. Dougherty reported Saturday.

On Friday, the Livingston County Sheriff's Office, the New York State Police and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) served two narcotics search warrants at two separate locations in West Sparta. Charged with third-degree criminal sale of a controlled substance and third-degree criminal possession of a controlled substance, both felonies, were Kenneth Hoag, 55, of Dansville; Kurt Redance, 26, of West Sparta; and Andrew J. Culilton, 37, of West Seneca.

The three were being held in pre-arraignment detention in the Livingston County Jail. They will be arraigned at a later date, Dougherty said Saturday. The investigation by the county Sheriff's Office, the New York State Police and DEA in conjunction with the Livingston County District Attorney's Office and the United States Attorney's Office will continue. More charges are expected and more information will be released Monday, Dougherty said.

ANDOVER

Red Cross Home Fire Campaign



Sharon Wallace, left, a Red Cross volunteer in Andover, and Emily Avondolio, RCC preparedness educator for the Red Cross in Buffalo, gave 10 boxes of smoke detectors to Andover Fire Department board President Brian Perkins and the department Saturday. The department will be able to get more smoke detectors from the Red Cross as needed, Perkins said. This is part of the Red Cross Home Fire Campaign. The fire department will install smoke detectors for free for Andover residents who want them. [BRIAN QUINN/DAILY REPORTER]

OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Long road to recovery

Officials, advocates raise awareness at Town Hall meeting

By Jason Jordan
The Spectator

HORNELL — State and local officials joined community leaders in exploring the region's ongoing heroin and opioid epidemic at a Town Hall meeting hosted by Deputy Mayor and Ninth Ward Alderman John Buckley on Saturday at the Hornell VFW Post.

As communities like Hornell begin to tackle the problem, leaders find themselves in search for a more well-rounded approach, that encompasses health, law enforcement and educational options in hopes of keeping the drug from becoming popular with another generation.

"I've done over 20 of these town halls and this is the most important one," Buckley said.

For police, addressing the problem from a law enforcement standpoint means working in cooperation with several agencies including the Sheriff's Office, The Steuben County District Attorney's Office and other local police departments.

"We've formed teams so we can more effectively pool our resources and fight the opioid problem in our area," he said.

Their efforts have led to an increase in drug-related arrests.

"Hornell responsible for 41 percent of drug arrests in Steuben County last year," Murray said. "We could say that Hornell really has a big problem, but the way I see it is that we're doing a more effective thing in Hornell than other areas."

The department has also sought to dedicate an officer full-time to be a liaison between policing drugs and getting people treatment, however, its federal grant application was rejected this year.

"We don't have a big drug house where someone is sitting back and making a million dollars selling to people. Generally we have addicts who can no longer afford their medication, so they will move to heroin which is cheaper, they can get it for \$5 a hit, and sell it for \$20 here," Murray said. "The people we're dealing with need treatment."

To entice people using heroin, the department took new steps last year.

"We've had an open door policy that anyone with an



A panel of experts from law enforcement, government, addiction treatment, and a former opioid addict assembled at the Hornell VFW post for a Town Hall meeting to raise awareness and discuss solutions to an emerging drug epidemic. (From left to right) Hornell Police Chief Ted Murray, State Senator Tom O'Mara, CEO of CASA Trinity Ann Domingos, Hornell Deputy Mayor John Buckley and former addict Marissa Height were members of the panel.

[JASON JORDAN PHOTO]

opioid problem, even if they feel that the police are on to them, they can come into the police department and through Loyola we can help them seek treatment," Murray said.

"We haven't had a whole lot of takers. We've had two people so far. We had one girl come in and she only lasted in treatment one day," he said, recalling the powerful hold the drug has on people.

Police will explore working with local clergy and organizations to reach out to people afflicted by addiction.

To supplement police efforts to steer people towards treatment, state legislators like Tom O'Mara have pushed to fund addiction services as a priority in the state budget. The 2017-2018 state budget includes nearly \$215 million to grow and expand the state's heroin and opioid addiction prevention, treatment, recovery, and education services.

The push has resulted in 25 new inpatient treatment beds to be located at a facility in Dansville.

O'Mara has sat on a state panel on heroin and opioid abuse for three years and says the problem is occurring in all areas of the state and opening more slots for treatment has to be priority No. 1.

"Treatment is an area we've been lacking on throughout the state," O'Mara said. "When you have an addict making a split second decision to get help, it needs to be there. We've heard countless stories on the task force about people who have lost loved ones during that waiting period."

While New York is facing better many states when it comes to overdose deaths, ranking 34th, according to a Rockefeller Institute study, more answers have to come

from the grassroots level to end the epidemic, according to O'Mara. "It's meetings like this and the work being done in places like Addison that are saving lives, every community has to get involved and tackle this, from church groups to fire departments and etc.," he said.

Ann Domingos, a 20-year addiction specialist and CEO of CASA Trinity, a multi-county, organization effort to provide outpatient services to addicts, agreed that prolonged treatment is key to success in fighting the war against opioids.

"Addiction is a chronic illness that resides in the brain, and it responds to treatment," she said. "We need more treatment out there."

Breakthroughs in new treatment types like peer recovery support programs, where former addicts shepherd people in recovery through tough times, is setting the bar for success.

"These are really enthusiastic individuals who want to give back," Domingos said. "Treatment is available, it works, and people get better and go on to lead really productive lives."

Insurers becoming more flexible with treatment partners and allowing up to 14 days without company approval has made a difference in wait times.

"The longer they're in treatment the more successful they are," said Jennifer Flaitz, director of inpatient services at Loyola Recovery in Hornell. "We used to have to fight for every single day."

Hornell Fire Chief Dan Smith, whose firefighters and EMS personnel are on the front lines of battling overdoses, expressed his feelings about seeing young people fade away before their eyes.

"It's hard to see young people lose their lives senselessly," he said.

Last year, the Fire Department responded to 29 overdose calls, and is on pace to smash that number, having responded to 12 so far this year.

"We see it as a rising problem. It's frustrating to have Chief (Ted) Murray offer such an amazing program and not see people take advantage of it," Smith said.

Marissa Height, a recovering addict, told her personal story to a crowded room. Height started smoking marijuana and drinking at age 14. By age 16, she had moved on to abusing opioid-based prescription painkillers, even suffering seizures in school as a result.

"Just let her die, she did it to

herself anyways," she recalled her classmates saying during a seizure.

They didn't understand that addiction can touch anyone.

"I was a straight-A student and the golden child and look where I ended up," Height said.

Her problems followed her to college, where heroin first came into the picture. It further devolved into using needles — which she promised she would never do, and eventually selling heroin herself.

"I had prepared for the fact that I was going to die," Height said, describing her "toxic relationship" with the drug. "Heroin has no conscience. Addiction robbed (my) values, morals and conscience."

Even having guns held to her head, and nearly being raped while trying to buy heroin was not enough to break the hold it had on her. The road to recovery began when she was pulled out of school by her mother, Theresa.

"I was the parent in denial, and was a huge enabler," Theresa admitted, hating to see her daughter go through the painful withdrawals from opioids. "I realized maybe I was just as sick as she was."

Despite their many ups and downs in the process of recovery, which included relapse and an instance where Theresa had her daughter arrested for stealing checks to feed her habit, one common goal remained intact.

"We will always work together to stay in recovery," she said of her family.

For the constant support, even when she felt she didn't deserve it, Marissa was thankful.

"I know every day I'm blessed," and will be a peer recovery specialist, and began an addiction recovery group in Addison and delivers speeches.

Marissa and Theresa now help host weekly support group meetings for addicts and their families every Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. at the Addison Fire Hall.

In Hornell, there is a renewed dedication to teaching children about the dangers of heroin and gateway drugs like marijuana from a young age.

"We have to nip this in the bud early with kids. Our elementary schools need to start focusing on this," said Norman McCumiskey, City Council member and Steuben Prevention Coalition program coordinator.

School Superintendent Doug Wyant said that he was putting together a panel presentation set for May 23 from 6-8 p.m. on the issue.

"We're constantly battling the misinformation that marijuana is fine for you," he said.

To assure that people seeking treatment for opioid problems locally get the help they need, more people in the community have to help erase the stigma and reach out.

"Seek out someone like me — your alderman, your mayor, your letter carrier, whoever. Send them a private Facebook message, we're there to help," Buckley urged in closing.

Many advocates selflessly make themselves available 24 hours a day. Locally, Loyola Recovery Foundation can be reached toll free by calling 1-877-519-7705.

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