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RWU Criminal Justice Expert Collaborates with Police to Help Stem Opioid Epidemic

The data system he created provides the most up-to-date information on overdoses as part of a countywide effort to redefine how police respond to the issue.

Roger Williams University is supporting opioid prevention and outreach initiatives in the area from multiple angles. Photographed by frankieleon, Flickr CC.

August 9, 2017 | Juan Siliezar

BRISTOL, R.I. – Roger Williams Criminal Justice Professor Sean Varano has been working with 27 Plymouth County police departments to develop a countywide model that is redefining how police track and respond to opioid overdoses – an epidemic that has swept across the nation.

It’s estimated that over two million Americans abused opioids in 2015 and that over 33,000 people died of overdoses in the U.S. that same year – up from 28,000 in 2014.

To help confront the issue, Varano and Stonehill College Professor of Criminology Pamela Kelly have developed a data repository system that tracks fatal and nonfatal overdoses in real-time and allows police and health officials to monitor them in aggregate for all of Plymouth County, Massachusetts. Currently, most other areas – including at the national level – rely on years-old data for evaluating the scope of the issue. This new system allows for communication and quick decision-making that greatly enhances the community’s capabilities and strategies to combat the crisis.
The data system is believed to be the first real-time numbers used to assess and respond to the opioid epidemic, Varano said. “The fact that we are able to track this and give police, policy makers and public health officials information about the prevalence of fatal and non-fatal overdoses on a real-time basis is a tremendous public health tool.”

The repository was created for Plymouth County Outreach, an initiative of all police departments in Plymouth County. The police departments have all entered a memorandum of understanding to conduct outreach visits within 24 hours to opioid abusers who suffered an overdose and are currently not in treatment.

The model is part of a law enforcement effort to transition from arrest based strategies to focus on intervention and prevention. It is led by two police chiefs from the area, East Bridgewater’s Scott Allen and Plymouth’s Michael Botieri. It builds upon previous efforts in Plymouth County to connect opioid users to treatment, which Varano and Kelly were also involved in.

Along with keeping track of overdoses, the data system alerts police departments to conduct follow-up outreach visits when an overdose occurs in the county. Upon receiving the 911 call, a designated officer enters the overdose into the repository. The entry then triggers an alert for a follow-up visit to the relevant police department, even if it’s across jurisdictional boundaries – an important fact since, according to the system’s data, over 40 percent of overdoses in Plymouth County happen in neighboring communities.

The outreach visits are conducted by non-uniformed officers and treatment specialists. Their sole purpose is getting the abuser into treatment or their family access to resources if the person is not already in some form of treatment.

“The first goal is to get more people into treatment,” Varano said. “The most important goal is to stop people from dying, to stop people from overdosing again. We know that access to services is the lynchpin. If we don’t get people access to services the likelihood that they’re going to overdose again and eventually die is increased exponentially.”

The approach is striking the root of the problem, said the East Bridgewater police chief. By getting the abuser into treatment, “we’re not having to go to that person’s house or family home on multiple calls for service because of their underlying substance abuse disorder. It’s community policing 101.”

At RWU, Varano’s work with opioid prevention initiatives has put the university in a position to address the problem from multiple angles. For instance, marketing students from the Gabelli School of Business are working with Plymouth County Outreach to market the initiative and a graduate student in the psychology department is identifying predictors of fatal opioid overdoses for the city of New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Varano has included many of his students in his research efforts and has one student interning at the East Bridgewater Police Department. He has also arranged for Chief Allen and other guest speakers to come to the Bristol campus and speak with criminal justice students on the issue.
"It’s pretty neat how this partnership has evolved," Chief Allen said. "It’s really opened up some opportunities for us to work with not only the faculty but the students at Roger Williams."

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