

SCCCC 4th Annual Inspirational Breakfast

Local drug epidemic likely to get worse, DA tells Chamber audience

by Richard L. Gaw, Staff Writer Chester County Press

Before about 130 local leaders from business, community, government and law enforcement, Hogan delivered “To Live in Die in Chester County,” a 40-minute review of how the current opioid crisis in the community began, and how it has escalated to the point where its statistics and numbers “will blow your mind – things that you had no idea were in the background of this opioid epidemic,” Hogan said.

The numbers Hogan shared are horrific:

- * Over the last 20 years, the U.S. has lost 500,000 people to drug overdoses.
- * 91 people die every day from prescription opioid overdoses.
- * Pennsylvania currently ranks fourth-highest of 50 states in the rate of drug overdoses, passed only by Ohio, West Virginia and Florida.
- * In 2016, 97 Chester County residents died from drug overdoses, 250 died in Montgomery County and Philadelphia had 900 drug overdose deaths.
- * In the last three years, drug overdoses have become the number one cause of death in the U.S., and that the number of drug-related deaths in Chester County is expected to rise over the next three to five years.

“I can tell you that already for 2017, [Chester County] was at 144 [drug overdose deaths], and Philadelphia is up to around 1,300,” he said. “These numbers are going up for all of us. So brace yourselves.

“This problem is mainly happening in the white, middle-to-upper-middle class communities. Look around this room now. It is not happening in North and West Philadelphia, where kids are overdosing. It’s happening here, to your neighbors.”

Hogan said that public outrage about the most recent drug epidemic – seen mainly in the abuse of heroin and prescription drugs like oxycodone – has only begun to gain traction in the last year or so.

“If the same number of people were dying in a war or from a disease in the last 20 years, people would be in the street, marching and yelling, calling out the government from the top down, demanding solutions,” Hogan said. “But it’s only in the last two years that people have started paying attention to these numbers, and the experts are telling us that the opioid crisis will expand to a half million more deaths. That’s how big a problem this is.”

The drug epidemic, Hogan said, has been exacerbated in recent years by a supply-and-demand relationship that has involved nearly everyone involved in the drug trade, from

the medical profession prescribing legal narcotics to treat pain and injuries, to drug trafficking organizations, largely from Mexico, who are sending a constantly growing supply of illegal narcotics like heroin over the border.

Close to home, Philadelphia has become the source of the purest and cheapest heroin in the U.S. – almost 70 percent pure – with costs far cheaper than the heroin sold in neighboring cities like New York City and Baltimore.

“It's the heroin capitol of the United States,” he said. “The best explanation we've heard is that when heroin came out – and it was the Colombians who first bought it in – New York City had already been an established source of drug trafficking, through organized crime,” Hogan said. “These guys needed a new market, so they looked around and said, 'What's close to New York, but is not New York, so we don't get our legs broken?'

“They looked at Boston and they looked at Philly. Philly was a lot larger and centrally located.”

Hogan said that the current heroin epidemic is the latest stage in a series of three periods in the U.S. over the last 45 years that has seen heroin use rise astronomically. In the early 1970s, the popularity of heroin use was influenced by the impact it had on Vietnam War soldiers' introduction to it during the conflict, heightened by the fact that the drug was produced in Southeast Asia.

By 1975 – as the Vietnam War came to a close – the epidemic faded from view, only to resurface in the 1990s, when the “Heroin Chic” look became the new fashion statement and influence on popular culture, until it eventually subsided when fear rose over the association between the use of hypodermic needles and the rising AIDS crisis.

The most current rise of heroin, Hogan said, was influenced by the increase in the use of crack cocaine, crystal meth, and then opioids. It's a bridge drug, he said, and it's cheaper. The cost of oxycodone can cost as much as \$30 a pill, and when multiplied by ten pills used a day, it can lead to the addict finding less expensive methods of maintaining an addiction.

“Can you keep up as a kid, two thousand bucks a week?” Hogan said. “No. You can't, so what do you do? But if it's thirty bucks a pill for Oxy, we can take care of your problem, particularly here in southeastern Pennsylvania, because we can take you to Philly and for five bucks, we can get you a dose of heroin. Suddenly, your \$300-a-day addiction just went down to ten bags at fifty bucks a day.”

If heroin and its partner fentanyl accounts for the dirty, back alley aspect of the most recent drug epidemic, then it's the astronomical rise in the abuse of prescription drugs that has come to be defined as the clean and perfectly legal component of the crisis, and its numbers are equally as startling: In 1998, the U.S. produced 11.5 tons of oxycodone. In 2013, 138 tons were produced, and today, U.S. citizens consume about 90 percent of the quantity made.

“There was a study done several years ago that stated that oxycodone was not addictive, which ricocheted around the medical industry,” he said. “Can you imagine saying that now, with a straight face? But for a good ten years, doctors were told that

oxycodone was not addictive. Doctors were told to monitor their patients for pain levels – as part of their primary function of care – to treat pain.

“Guess what? Oxycodone is really good at treating pain. The doctors' response was, 'I am doing my duty. I am treating the pain. I am prescribing this non-addictive drug to my patients,' and that's how we went from 11 tons to 138 tons.”

Prescription drugs rank nearly as high on the death threat rankings in southeastern Pennsylvania as heroin and fentanyl, cocaine, marijuana and crystal meth.

“If you would have asked me when I was a federal prosecutor if I would ever be up here telling you that drug threat rankings would include prescription drugs, I would have told you that you were nuts, flat out crazy,” Hogan said. “But that is what's going on in southeastern Pennsylvania.

“You take a 16 year-old kid who blows out his knee, who has never had alcohol, never had caffeine or nicotine, and you give them the most powerful drug on earth – synthetic heroin – they are going to get addicted. It is going to be the best thing they've ever felt in their lives, and you will have built yourself an addict on the spot.”

Hogan shared some of the good news coming from his office's war on drugs in the county. Operation Wildfire – run through the District Attorney's Office – has been able to nab several drug dealers from Philadelphia who transport drugs to Chester County. The county has also developed a task force with Delaware County that addresses drug treatment; removing the drugs from the street; and education.

The establishment of Narcotics Overdose Prevention & Education [N.O.P.E.] allows parents who have lost family members to drugs to speak to middle- and high-schoolers in Chester County.

Hogan said that Narcan, carried by police agencies throughout the county, have saved 187 people from drug overdoses.

In addition, Hogan said that prescription drug boxes set up in many municipalities have gone from collecting 1,300 pounds of prescription drugs to more than 10,000 pounds collected in 2017.

“People always tell me, 'You can't win a war on drugs,' and I tell them that in 1920, the FBI declared war on bank robbers,” Hogan said. “There are more bank robbers today than there were in the 1920s, but you have to fight that war. You have to fight that battle, in order to keep your country safe. You are a gardener. You are pulling the weeds to make sure that the weeds don't take over the rest of your garden. You need to fight it every day, or it will take over.”