

Vivitrol program under way at jail

BY ANITA BOWSER 7/21/16 Leader times

As the opioid epidemic looms large over Armstrong County, officials and service providers have initiated a new program to combat addiction and crime.

This month, the second half of a two-part program begins as some inmates at Armstrong County Jail opt into drug and alcohol counseling with Family Services of Western Pennsylvania, said Kami Anderson, executive director of Armstrong-Indiana Clarion Drug and Alcohol Commission.

The other part of the equation, Vivitrol injections, has been going on for a few months, she said.

“So far, I’ve given about 30 (Vivitrol) shots,” said Armstrong County Jail Nurse Destiny Salsgiver, LPN.

Vivitrol is a medication used to quash the effects of alcohol and opioids, such as heroin and many narcotic pain medications. Inmates can volunteer for the program or be referred by a service provider or court officials.

Salsgiver said word-of-mouth is one of the primary ways inmates are learning of the program.

“We’re just getting the program up and started. Inmates hear about it and ask for information.”

Salsgiver said she passes out pamphlets to help inmates understand the benefits and effects of Vivitrol.

Inmates begin drug and alcohol counseling at the jail, she said. Before discharge, they must enroll in an approved program, including monthly injections of Vivitrol, to continue after their release, she said.

About three or four days before an inmate’s release, Salsgiver administers the initial Vivitrol injection.

The effects of Vivitrol last about four weeks with shots administered every 28 days, said Dr. Rod Groomes, emergency room director at ACMH.

Vivitrol has been an approved medication in the U.S. for about a decade. Addiction professionals have had a lot of success with the medication, he said.

Jail counselors have been providing therapy so far, but drug and alcohol treatment specialists at Family Services of Western Pennsylvania will begin providing services at the jail this month.

Jail officials aren’t the only ones helping to spread the word about the program.

For the past couple of weeks, President Judge Kenneth G. Valasek has been recommending the program during sentencing.

In his Armstrong County courtroom, Valasek has begun sentencing people convicted on drug and drug-related offenses to jail time, rather than house arrest. Inside the jail, they have access to the counseling-Vivitrol program, he said.

“They can get a free Vivitrol shot and then be hooked up with counseling the day they are paroled,” he said.

Valasek said he hopes the program will help people steer clear of opioids long enough to get them on track and keep them out of jail.

It’s too early to draw any conclusions, but Valasek and others are hoping that treating addiction will help decreased recidivism rates.

The Armstrong County Prison Board is also concerned about the rate of opioid addiction in the county, said Commissioner Pat Fabian, secretary of the prison board.

Fabian said he recently met with a group of female inmates to hear their suggestions and concerns about the jail.

“Eleven of 12 female inmates said they were addicts,” he said. “We’ve got to get people into treatment.”

Like Valasek, Fabian said he believes increasing access to mental health and drug and alcohol services will bring about positive changes.

Last week, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reported an increase in drug overdoses across Pennsylvania. According to the report, Armstrong County had the second highest per capita rate of drug-related overdose deaths in the state in 2015. Philadelphia County had the highest rate.