

Heroin Use in PA Rises While Local Police Resources Fall

By Gerald Cross

The statewide surge in heroin abuse is terrifying and shows no signs of stopping, while at the same time a growing number of municipalities are finding it harder to fund an adequate level of police coverage.

That's one of the takeaways from a series of recent Pennsylvania Economy League Civic Leadership Education events across the state that focused on the devastating heroin epidemic.

As the highly addictive drug migrates from big cities to small towns and suburban communities, it brings with it heroin-related crime and violence from drug deals gone bad and users turning to theft and burglary to support their habit. Problems spill over to the families of users and the community at large, leading to domestic situations ranging from child neglect to stealing valuables from loved ones and neighbors. Heroin ensnares the richest of the rich and poorest of the poor.

Against this backdrop is another reality: many local governments and their police forces are ill equipped to deal with the epidemic. It is becoming increasingly difficult for individual municipalities on their own to fund 24/7 police departments staffed by full-time officers. The result, particularly in borough and township police forces, is fewer officers on patrol, increased overtime costs and more reliance on part-time police to fill in the gaps.

The chief of a Northeastern Pennsylvania borough, who presented at one of our events, said his force of three full-time and seven part-time officers cannot keep up with the escalating drug problem. It is, he said, an overwhelming task, estimating 90 percent of burglaries, robberies and thefts in his town are linked to drug addiction.

It's easy to see why many municipalities are turning to lower-cost part-time officers to bridge the police coverage gap. Part-time officers seem like a bargain. Hourly rates are less than for full-timers and there are generally no fringe benefits or long-term pension costs.

But scratch a little deeper and problems start to surface.

“Municipalities are looking at it strictly from a cost standpoint not from a cost effectiveness standpoint,” said long-time police consultant Ron Smeal, an FBI-trained former police chief who has conducted police department operations and management studies for over 90 Pennsylvania municipalities.

Part-time officers might be effective in the simple role of watchmen and report takers, Mr. Smeal said, but often lack the time or expertise to handle significant investigations or provide follow-up for complaints. Uniforms, vests and other equipment costs for someone who might work only a couple

of shifts a month adds up. Part-timers generally have less of an investment in the community and may be unfamiliar or less sensitive to the dynamics of the local population.

Municipal liability is a problem as well. Part-time officers often work two, three or more jobs. Shifts can be back to back, raising questions of fatigue that could lead to an injury, auto accident or even a shooting as judgment becomes impaired. According to Mr. Smeal: "It's a liability issue waiting to happen."

The increased use of part-time officers and similar penny-pinching measures serve to hollow-out an already uneven level of local police protection across the state that makes us all more vulnerable to crime in general. Many towns are protected by miniscule police departments of only one or two officers where 24-hour coverage is an illusion. Nearby jurisdictions often fail to share information. Numerous municipalities don't have local police coverage at all, relying on the stretched thin resources of the state police.

State policy makers must come to the realization that our fragmented local police system is broken. Reform must occur so that local governments provide the service that citizens expect and deserve. The health, safety and welfare of our communities depend on it.

Gerald Cross is the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Economy League Central Division