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FEATURED

Town hall meeting to address opioid crisis

David Palmer Oct 19, 2018



This Oct. 19, 2016, file photo shows the packaging of Vivitrol at an addiction treatment center in Joliet, Ill.

Carla K. Johnson | Associated Press



The opioid crisis, responsible for numerous deaths, will be the focus of a community meeting Tuesday in Cullman.

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Alabama will join with school and government officials in Cullman on Tuesday, Oct. 23, for a town hall meeting to discuss the opioid crisis and its effects on families in the Cullman area.

The town hall meeting kicks off Red Ribbon Week in north Alabama and will be from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. at the Cullman Civic Center, 510 Fifth St. SW. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Parents, students, educators, law enforcement and anyone concerned about opioid addiction and overdose is encouraged to attend.

Cullman city and county school systems, along with the Cullman mayor's office, Cullman County Commission, Cullman County Sheriff's Office, Cullman County Juvenile Probation Office, Cullman Police Department, Cullman City Parks and Recreation Department and the Cullman County District Attorney's Office will participate in the program.

"In the war on drugs, you have to fight on many levels," Sheriff Matt Gentry said. "The first way is through education, working with our children, our students to show how these drugs become addictive and can lead to death."

Since 2009, an increase in opioid use has been found in teenagers and young adults into their 30s, Gentry said.

"Law enforcement is one part of the effort," Gentry said. "But we have to do more on the education side, to show the dangers and prevent more people from trying the drugs and becoming addicted and putting their lives at risk. Success at that level will make a difference."

The meeting Tuesday is the kickoff Red Ribbon Week, observed annually Oct. 23-31, which encourages communities to take a visible stand against drugs. The observance raises awareness of drug use and the problems related to drugs in our communities. It encourages parents, educators, business owners, and other community organizations to promote drug-free lifestyles, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office of the Northern District of Alabama.

"Fighting to end the opioid epidemic in our country is a priority of the Department of Justice," U.S. Attorney Jay Town said. "We are aggressively prosecuting drug traffickers, including pill mill doctors who prescribe opioid painkillers for profit, rather than medical need. Learning more about the dangers and availability of opioid drugs is a good start to reducing their devastating effects on our families and our communities."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more people in America died from opioid overdoses than from gunshots or car crashes in 2017.

Opioid addiction and overdose often starts with abuse of prescribed opioid painkillers and, according to a recent Harvard University study, Alabama's 4th Congressional District, which includes much of the state's northern and northwestern counties, has higher prescribing rates of opioids than any other district in the country.

The Harvard study, published this summer in the American Journal of Public Health, used 2016 prescription data and 2010 U.S. Census population data to identify which areas of the U.S. have the highest prescription rates for fentanyl, hydrocodone, morphine and other opioids. The study showed 166 prescriptions per 100 people in Alabama's 4th Congressional District, more than double the country's average of 67 opioid prescriptions per 100 people, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

"I am excited about the opportunity for parents and community members to hear from the U.S. Attorney's Office about the impact that opioid abuse is having on our community, and a plan to help curve that negative impact," Cullman County Schools Superintendent Shane Barnette said.

"Cullman City Schools is proud to partner with the United States Attorney's Office in having a town hall meeting to bring awareness and information to help resolve the opioid crisis facing our nation and communities," Cullman City Schools Superintendent Susan Patterson added. "I would like to encourage parents, teachers, and community members to join us in the effort to address this issue in our community."

Doors will open Tuesday at the civic center at 5:30 p.m. There is no cost to attend the session.

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David Palmer

David Palmer has decades of experience in the newspaper industry. He currently serves as editor of The Cullman Times.

