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## (Our view) Community must unite against opioids

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Fatal drug overdoses and addiction are common topics and problems throughout the nation, and Cullman County is not immune from what is known as the opioid crisis.

What are opioids? They include the illegal drug heroin, synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, pain relievers available legally by prescription, such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, morphine, and many others.

All of the drugs can be addictive, and misused they are deadly.

Heroin is the top of the heap where deadly drugs are concerned. What local law enforcement officials are seeing as a pure form of heroin coming into the area, often mixed with fentanyl. The drug is so dangerous that using it one time can lead to death.

Numerous fatalities have been attributed to heroin and fentanyl in Cullman County and across Alabama. The situation is so bad that the beginning of Red Ribbon Week — an effort to bring knowledge to communities about these drugs — will see a host of law enforcement and government officials join with area students, teachers and parents for a town hall meeting Tuesday at the Cullman Civic Center.

Law enforcement agencies are frantically trying to knock a large dent in the illegal drug trade, targeting heroin and other opioids.

“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,” said U.S. Jay Town of the Northern District of Alabama.

Cullman County Sheriff Matt Gentry, who has worked for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, said reaching students early with information about the dangers of opioids is a valuable part of fighting drug abuse. He said the use of opioids has increased among teenagers and young adults into their 30s.

Tuesday’s meeting is an excellent opportunity to learn first-hand about the dangers of opioids, whether they are legal or illegal. The information can be valuable in steering young people away from the drugs and in understanding how they get into the hands of people illegally.

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.

Bringing the community together to stand up against drug abuse will help push back against the illegal trade in these drugs.

The meeting Tuesday will be 6-7 p.m., and is open to anyone concerned about the rise in drug abuse and drug-related deaths.

Stopping the opioid crisis in Cullman County is going to take a community effort. Gaining knowledge of these drugs and their effects, and being watchful, will assist law enforcement in cleaning up this rapid descent into addiction.

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