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# State officials address opioid abuse in Alabama

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By Morgan Young, Reporter  CONNECT

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - The United States Department of Justice announced on Thursday that federal agents arrested more than 400 people for opioid fraud cases. This is the largest operation of its kind for the DOJ. 56 of the arrested suspects are doctors, and more than 120 of them are charged for taking part in prescribing and distributing opioids and other narcotics.

According to Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall, one of the cases came out of Mobile. He said the arrest was a joint effort between multiple agencies, but it is just "the tip of the iceberg" that is the opioid abuse issue in Alabama.

"We see the statistics. You have more opioid prescriptions written than there are people in the state," Marshall said. "You look at the per capita data. Alabama is in the top three in the issuance of those prescriptions. We know that every day we are losing young people and others to opioid addiction and overdose. It remains an issue in this state and one we have to ultimately tackle well."

He said the state is taking a multi-layered approach because officials realize it is not only a law enforcement issue but one involving physical and mental health.

"We have to be able to bring all the disciplines together to deal with what we recognize nationally, as well as in Alabama, as a crisis," Marshall said.

Marshall said Alabama has made progress on this matter but has more work to do. He said the state is working to develop systems with technology to track issues like opioid abuse that are easy for doctors to use and are accessible to pharmacists that have the capacity to cross state lines.

Currently, the state has a Prescription Drug Monitoring Program. Pharmacist James Jones said PDMP is helpful and effective but cases like the one announced Thursday brings a level of "nervousness" to what he does.

"That's more than 400 people who got caught, but we know there are thousands who are getting away with it," Jones said. "I really think most people in medical profession want to be a part of the solution, not the problem."

According to Marshall, it becomes difficult when healthcare professionals have to discern between legitimate, necessary prescriptions and ones that are being written carelessly or even fraudulently.

Jones said he and his staff make an effort to analyze each patient before selling them the drugs.

"We try to make sure that the patient is taking it for a legitimate reason and make sure the patient has actually seen the physician," Jones said. "We do that with every patient that comes in our store. If something's not in order, we turn those prescriptions down."

Bret Hamilton with the Drug Enforcement Agency said he is working with the Alabama Fusion Center to start a program called OD Mapping. It would allow enforcement and health department personnel to track overdoses across the state more efficiently. He said the program will hopefully be ready in the next two to three months, but he admits the data is somewhat "sporadic" because there is a time lapse in when officials are made aware of an overdose.

For now, Marshall said the state is working on the issue of opioid abuse in Alabama, as well as the financial burden created by fraudulent overprescribing.

He said Alabama has made progress, but there is still work to be done.

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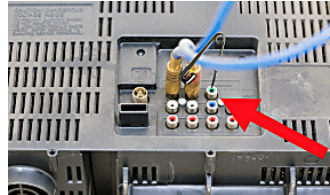
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