

Law enforcement's story: Looking for the trouble

By Jaci Smith

Scott Robinson has “people.”

That was apparent by how often the Rice County deputy sheriff's cell phone rang during a recent two-hour interview.

One call was from someone letting him know where a key suspect was at that moment. Another was from a cop, ready to help him set up a bust.

A third was from someone looking to do a deal with his undercover persona.

Robinson, and his partner, Faribault Police investigator Mark Krenik, say they are the busiest that they've ever been in their careers since they began working on the Rice County Drug Task Force.

The task force, created in January of this year, is one of the ways area law enforcement is combating what they call the “significant” problem of oxycodone and heroin use in Northfield. Oxycodone is more commonly known by its pharmaceutical name, OxyContin. And the task force is not alone. Since — and even before — former police chief Gary Smith's now-infa-



mous July 3, 2007, press conference announcing that as many as 250 young people in the area were using heroin, there were those who knew and were working on the problem of opiate use in Northfield.

They all agree they've made progress in the last year, but not nearly enough.

Four men have died of heroin overdoses in the last year and three more nearly did, according to the county. All had home addresses north of County Road 1 in Rice County.

That's an overdose death rate two times those of Ramsey County and Hennepin County combined.

Law Enforcement

There are the hours Robinson works as part of his regular 40. There are the allotted overtime hours he works each week. Then, there are the hours he donates because he believes the use of opiates is a serious problem in Northfield and the northern part of the county, and because he knows the task force is making a difference. He is working with his boss, Sheriff Richard Cook, on a plan to spend even more time in Northfield.

The task force was formed, according to Cook, partly because of economics and partly because of philosophy.

The county was former-

ly part of the South Central Drug Investigation Unit, a collaborative that for many years was run by Northfield Police Capt. Roger Schroeder, and made up of law enforcement from Waseca, Steele, Blue Earth, Faribault and Rice counties.

The unit was funded by federal money, which as early as 2007 was threatening to dry up, Cook said. That would've forced Rice County to come up with more than \$100,000 just to put one officer on the unit, and his time would've been split between the five counties.

In addition, a Rice County member of the unit, a Northfield police officer, had been repeat-

BY THE NUMBERS

Much has been made of the numbers former police chief Gary Smith used in his July 3, 2007, press conference. From federal, state, county, school district and law enforcement sources, here are some statistics on the problem of opiate use in Northfield and greater northern Rice County.

- People in northern Rice County (where all the county's ODs occurred) died in 2007 of an overdose at two times the rate they did in Hennepin County and Ramsey County over the same time period. (Verification of the math used to produce this statistic comes courtesy of a statistician serving on the News' Watchdog Team).

- In 2005, less than 1 percent of heroin users in Rice County who sought treatment reported using in the last month, compared to 2.1 percent average statewide. In 2007, 5.9 percent did, compared to 3.5 percent average statewide.

- 6.1 percent of Rice County people seeking treatment for addiction reported heroin as their drug of choice, compared to 3.5 percent average statewide.

- In the 2006-07 school year, 30 students at Northfield High School, or 2 percent of the total student body, were treated for some form of chemical addiction, 15 of whom were treated for OxyContin or heroin use. In the 2007-08 school year, eight were treated, four of whom used OxyContin or heroin.

- According to the 2006 (latest available) federal drug health survey from the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, the number of users who seek treatment for

illicit drug use represents between 5 and 10 percent of the population actually using.

- The number of juvenile drug-related cases opened in the county increased from 40 in 2005 to 64 for the first 11 months of 2007. Meanwhile, adult drug-related cases opened declined from 143 in 2005 to 113 for the first 11 months of 2007.

- The percentage of positive drug test results on juveniles incarcerated in the county has declined for every drug except opiates.

- In the most recent state school safety survey (from 2007), 12 percent of senior boys and 9 percent of senior girls, or 25 to 30 students, admitted using a drug other than marijuana, alcohol or tobacco within 30 days of taking the survey.

- A 2008 Healthy Community Initiative Survey found 27 percent of juniors said it was "easy" to get prescription drugs not for them. 5 percent had done it.

- The same survey found that 11 percent of juniors thought about half their classmates were using some "other drug" that wasn't alcohol, tobacco or marijuana. 10 percent reported they thought it was sometimes/usually OK that they did. 63 percent said they knew it was wrong.

- Sources: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Minnesota Department of Health, Minnesota Department of Education, Rice County Sheriff's Department, Rice County Department of Corrections, Northfield School District, Healthy Community Initiative.



edly coming to unit meetings and talking about a heroin problem in the city that needed to be addressed. Cook said he knew that dealing with that was not going to be easy, and that it wasn't going to get enough attention in the existing unit.

So, in the months before Chief Smith's press conference, Cook said he began discussing a "paradigm shift," the creation of a Rice County-only task force that would not only work on enforcement, but also on collaboration among local police units, health care providers, advocates and educators.

He had every police agency's support to do it, including Northfield.

The Northfield Police Department was struggling in 2007. Officers knew there was a opiate drug problem from an-

ecdotal evidence picked up on patrol and from the work Schroeder supervised.

But the department doesn't have enough officers when it's fully staffed to have a narcotics unit, and in 2007, it had several open positions. At one point, the Northfield officer on the South Central Drug Investigation Unit had to leave the unit to cover vacancies back home.

By August 2007, the Northfield Police Department was also missing its chief, with Schroeder doing double duty as interim chief and head of the South Central Drug unit.

Shortly after that, with Schroeder's backing, Cook publicly announced the end of Rice County's involvement in the South Central unit and the creation of the Rice County Drug Task

OPIATE FAQs

• Where do they get it from?

Although there are local dealers, the main heroin/OxyContin pipeline is most certainly the Twin Cities, police say. OxyContin is sold by pill; heroin, depending on the type, is sold by rock — often tied up with a small balloon — or powder — wrapped in a paper “bundle.”

Why so many overdoses?

Each case is clearly different, but the reason why heroin is so dangerous a drug (one federal report said more people die of heroin than any other illicit drug except cocaine) is that a user never really knows the potency of the dose they are taking. Powder heroin is often “cut” with filler to lessen the high and extend the supply, which earns dealers more money. The more potent or pure the heroin, the less needed to depress a body’s nervous system enough to be fatal. Law enforcement has said the heroin coming into Northfield recently is quite pure, thus quite potent.



Force.

Since January, Cook says the Rice County task force has received more intelligence and made more progress than anyone had in five years before on the South Central unit.

The task force has executed 18 operations — more than two a month — with at least one other partner jurisdiction, and has made more than two dozen arrests.

“I’m comfortable saying my cases in Faribault are coke, crack and meth,” Robinson said. “In Northfield, it’s half pharmaceuticals, half heroin.”

There were three arrests that were critical in combating the opiate problem in Northern Rice County: Jacob Wolf, 24, and Benjamin Hanks, 25, both of Northfield; and Sean Donkers, 23, of Nerstrand, all of whom are already convicted or fac-

ing trial on drug charges. Police consider the three to be heavy opiate users and dealers. One police official called them the “head of the snake.”

“This is a tough group we’re dealing with here,” Cook said. “It’s 18- to 25-year-olds, mostly 20- to 25-year-olds for the more serious busts, but it’s almost like they had this network and it has just grown from there.”

While the busts are certainly more public, there are other less obvious ways the task force helps combat the opiate problem in the area.

Robinson has done many speaking engagements, including an appearance at last year’s “After the Headlines” event at the middle school, and worked with the Rice County Chemical Health Coalition to create a DVD it hopes to release soon on drug and

alcohol use prevention. Task force members routinely show up at meetings of the Mayor’s Task Force on Youth Alcohol and Drug Use and it isn’t out of the ordinary to find Robinson walking the beat talking with as many kids as he can get to know. He’s convinced the information they have will help solve Northfield’s opiate use issue.

The Northfield Police Department, according to new Chief Mark Taylor, has been ramping up its own efforts as well in the last year. Robinson says information the department has given the task force has been instrumental in many of the arrests that have been made.

Beyond enforcement, Taylor said he has several other ideas, chief among them building relationships with citizens in the community. Recently, he instituted walking night beats for officers.

Taylor said he also meets monthly with a de facto “board” of police chiefs and the county sheriff to share support, ideas and information. Everything his officers hear on the street gets passed on to the task force.

In addition, Taylor is excited about the trial DARE program that recently graduated its first class at the elemen-

tary school level and, in conjunction with the school district, he'd like to help develop a comparable curriculum for use in the high school, if the district's interested. He's still working internally on that idea and hasn't approached the district with it yet, he said. And the department has school resource officer Thad Monroe working in the schools.

Most importantly, the chief hopes to announce a Northfield officer's assignment to the county drug task force by next week.

Although it would be difficult to make a direct tie locally between opi-

ate use and other crime, Taylor said he has seen in his time here the type of crimes that studies have repeatedly shown are tied to drug use, such as burglary and theft. He won't say whether or not there has been a marked increase because he doesn't know.

"I think it's dangerous to put it on a scale — more of a problem than what? — but it is a significant problem in the community, the most significant problem we have to deal with right now," Taylor said. "But we have made great progress in the last year."

Prevention/ Youth community

The information revealed in former chief Smith's press conference didn't come as much of a surprise to Josh Hinnenkamp, executive director of the Northfield Union of Youth (the Key), or other people who work with youth.

"Providers knew before the press conference that they were seeing an increase in people seeking treatment for heroin addiction from the Northfield area," said Zach Pruitt, coordinator of the Healthy Community Initiative.

And it was hard to hear

because some groups had been talking publicly about what was being done but were basically ignored, according to Kathy Sandberg, of the Rice County Chemical Health Coalition. Sandberg is also a member of the Mayor's Task Force on Youth Alcohol and Drug Use.

"It was as if there was this horrible problem that Gary Smith knew about and no one else did, or they did and refused to do anything about it," Sandberg said. "What all our organizations had been doing all along got no play at all."