Western and Eastern Ends of Peninsula Report Different Problems in Curbing Drug Abuse

Drugs: *From page 1*

morphine, and vicodin.

Poverty is helping to fuel the rise in the local drug trade, Lt. Mills said, with one 80 milligram oxycontin pain pill worth up to $75 on the street. Vicodin pills are routinely sold for $5 to $7 apiece, and methadone for $10 per dose.

"There's a lot of money involved," Lt. Mills said. "People who have a legitimate prescription can pay a small copay to get the drug, and then resell it. With difficult economic times, people often turn to this to supplement their income. You have someone who legitimately needs the medication but also needs money right now for house payments, gas, or to pay their bills, and they will sell part or all of their prescription. There's public knowledge that there's money to be made. We've had cases of older folks asking their son or daughter, 'Do you know anyone who would want to buy some vicodin?' They are being forced by economics into making a bad decision. Then there are cases of young adults stealing medications from their parents or grandparents, and the patient may not even realize there is some medicine missing."

Visiting more than one physician to collect multiple prescriptions, or faking pain to obtain painkillers are other ways people can get access to the drugs, which they then sell. This is prescription fraud, a four-year felony.

To cut off the supply at its source, the SANE team has turned to physicians and pharmacists, urging them to take extra care in not providing a large supply at one time, and has arranged informational speakers to address doctors and nurses at local hospitals. In a one-year-old program, the narcotics team now sends a monthly list to all area pharmacists, naming patients who have been caught selling their prescription drugs. The pharmacist can then choose to not serve that patient or to dispense the medication differently.

It's been a helpful measure, Lt. Mills said, and pharmacies outside the area have even asked to be added to the fax list.

"These measures don't always result in a criminal charge or an arrest, but maybe they will get the person some needed help," he said.

Years ago, he said, hospital emergency rooms could help prevent the problem by keeping and sharing lists of people who were "shopping around" for prescriptions from different doctors, but today, privacy laws prevent health care providers from supplying each other, or the narcotics team, with such information. The privacy law, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, is known as HIPAA.

Another way pharmacists and police work together is through a program called MAPS, the Michigan Automated Prescription System, which tracks all locations where a patient's prescriptions have been filled. Duplicate prescriptions will show up here. Pharmacies are mandated by law to participate.

At the tribal health clinic in St. Ignace, which provides a large share of the doctor visits in the area and fills about 3,000 prescriptions a month, participating in MAPS is not mandatory, but the pharmacy does so because "it's in the best interests of the community," said pharmacist Phil Siebigteroth.

The pharmacy will only dispense a maximum of 30 days worth of medicine at a time in most cases, Mr. Siebigteroth said, while the law actually allows for filling up to a six-month supply of a prescription – something he suggests many pharmacists or physicians wouldn't do, anyway. He points out, however, that "a 'big jar' of 100 vicodin, for example, is not really a lot of vicodin." At a maximum allowable dose of eight tablets a day, a month's worth of the drug is 240 tablets.

At this and other pharmacies, patients are not allowed to refill prescriptions if they claim to run out early, and if they claim prescriptions were stolen, they must file a police report. Damaged medication must be returned to the pharmacy, where it is chemically analyzed to be sure it is actually the drug it is claimed to be.

"We hold a hard line" on managing prescriptions, Mr. Siebigteroth said.

While cutting down the local supply of cocaine and working with people in the medical field are positive steps, they won't solve the drug problem, Lt. Mills said, because, "If you arrest people who are selling in the community, you still have a market there of addicted people" who may turn to other drugs. The painkillers, which are opiates, are highly addictive.

The high street price of the pharmacy-made painkillers has led to a growing market for heroin, a cheaper opiate, in the Eastern U.P. and northern lower Michigan, he said. Most of the heroin that comes in is not produced here, but is brought in by local people in small shipments from the Detroit and Grand Rapids areas.

"We're seeing a nationwide upswing in drugs in rural areas, as opposed to cities, and in my opinion, it's because law enforcement is lower in rural areas and the bad guys know it..."

– Detective Lieutenant Jeff Racine, UPSET

This is in contrast with parts of the Western U.P., where they "actually now have people moving to the U.P. from Detroit, Milwaukee, and Chicago just to sell dope," said Detective Lieutenant Jeff Racine of Marquette.

"I never dreamed it would get this bad here," he said. "We're seeing a nationwide upswing in drugs in rural areas, as opposed to cities, and in my opinion, it's because law enforcement is lower in rural areas and the bad guys know it. They know the uniforms are spread thin, and they are targeting these areas. In Michigan, we're down between 1,600 and 2,000 police officers since before 9/11."

In Mackinac County, drug cases are handled by Prosecuting Attorney Fred Feleppa.

"There is an upswing in drugs here, especially prescription abuse or prescription diversion," he said. "If you have a prescription bottle of 100 Vicodin and you use 10 tablets, you can sell the rest for some fairly easy money. I think there is an entire subculture out there in Mackinac County where people are buying and selling." And while most participating in this form of drug abuse tend to be young or middle-aged adults, "it does trickle down to the kids," Mr. Feleppa said.

A SANE detective stationed on Mackinac Island in recent summers has been successful in generating some arrests there, Mr. Feleppa said, and probably "is just scratching the surface."

The poor economy is definitely a trigger for other crimes seen recently in the county, as well as drugs, said Sheriff Scott Strait.

"When the economy goes south, the crime rate goes up," he said. "People get stressed out and start looking to defraud somebody of something. Our business picks up. Generally we're seeing more bad checks, more credit card and Internet fraud complaints.

"Prescription drug abuse is by far the worst it's ever been," he said. "It's growing tremendously."

Embezzlement cases in the county have also been higher than usual, with five in the last year, Mr. Feleppa said, but that crime is underreported, as "most people are just quietly fired."

Larceny of gas, reported in the area last summer, has gone down since the price has gone down, and a rash of break-ins in the Les Cheneaux area reported over the past two years has also seemed to subside, the sheriff said.

In that area, a Neighborhood Watch volunteer group has formed and is active in Clark Township, something Sheriff Strait would like to see expanded into other areas in the county.

Meanwhile, the SANE team continues using undercover buyers to infiltrate the drug network, and is encouraged by the good results that came from the local cocaine investigation over the past couple of years.

"One good thing is we don't see a lot of methamphetamine labs up here, and in cocaine, we've taken down some big targets over the past year or two, some in Mackinac County," Lt. Mills said. "We've had some good dealer knock-offs in the past three years in St. Ignace, the Mackinaw City area, and Cheboygan area. We don't see heroin dealers on the street corners here, as you do in the cities. As for the work we've done so far this year, I think we're having an impact, but it will take awhile to see the effects."

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– Lieutenant Ken Mills, SANE

More information about forming a Neighborhood Watch group is available from the Mackinac County Sherrif's Office.

To report suspected drug activity to SANE, call (800) 621-8651. Callers may remain anonymous.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Freedom Finally Attained for All

To the Editor:

More than 140 years ago, a lonely but determined president, determined to free black people, issued his emancipation proclamation. His dream of freedom was finally realized, not during the Civil War, but this year, when a young black man's election to the highest office in the land finally made us all free.

As a student in the1950s and as a young street reporter in Detroit, I knew then that the dream of Lincoln and the words of our constitution and the Declaration of Independence had still yet to be realized, because I knew then that black men, women, and children were not being treated as true Americans. And when I saw that horror and experienced it, I knew that I was not free.

These words, "that the government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth" – and we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men, black and white, are created equal – are finally true. Lincoln's words are real now, and his slaves are truly free.

I am in my senior years now and never did I think I would see what I saw in Grant Park in Chicago Tuesday, November 4, never. That the son of a man born in Africa would become President of the United States. Barack Obama's victory sends a message to the world that all Americans are free, and so am I.

Don Howe
St. Ignace

Obama Election Marks Significant Moment in American History

To The Editor:

You betcha Joann and I are thrilled that Senator Barack Obama is our new president-elect. And, most certainly, the world is also, as his victory brought an outpouring of celebration on continent after continent in one nation after another.

Now, granted, President-elect Obama's election was not a referendum on race in America, but that will be the "story" which ripples through American history from this day forth. Even Senator John McCain, in his gracious concession speech, accorded due mention to the significance of this historical moment.

In fact, this election was a mandate to get this country moving again, economically, socially, philosophically, and spiritually.

So, at day's end, this is an exciting time to be an American. However, even while noting that, the enormous challenges confronting us on our way forward will neither be easy nor painless. But confront them we will, united in purpose with hope and optimism.

Personally, my political hope and my moral hope is that "trickle-down economics" receives the burial it so well deserves in a coffin large enough to accommodate a good chunk of the greed and fear eating away at America's soul. Then, those beautiful words we sing "And Crown Thy Good with Brotherhood" will resonate with meaning across America and around the world.

Ronald Wallin
Joann Leal
Mackinaw City

Michigan Politics

By George Weeks

Obama Highlights Granholm During Transition

There, in close-up view just off the right shoulder of Barack Obama at his first press conference as president-elect in Chicago, was Governor Jennifer Granholm, a member of his transition economic advisory board – called an "All-Star Cast" on CNN.

Obama in his opening remarks singled out Granholm, saying he was "glad to be joined" by her on a day of grappling with economic grim news of joblessness and Ford/GM loss figures.

The Friday event further fanned speculation that Granholm might next year join his cabinet, possibly as energy secretary (Obama earlier used her in a forum highlighting the alternative energy issues she has touted in Michigan) or commerce secretary (raised by CNN in its interview with her Friday).

In his Saturday e-mail blitz, Saul Anuzis, the ever-combative Republican state chairman, said of her role as Obama adviser: "I guess he wants to find out what NOT to do?!?"

Should Granholm join the Obama cabinet or get a federal judicial appointment before completing the remaining two years in her last term, it would give Lieutenant Governor John Cherry a boost for his expected 2010 gubernatorial campaign.

There was a similar boost for Lieutenant Governor Bill Milliken when Governor George Romney left in January 1969 to join the Nixon cabinet. Milliken subsequently won three four-year terms, giving him a record 14 years as governor, a record that can't be broken unless voters undo the constitutional limit of two terms that they approved in 1992.

Other reflections on the historic presidential election and its impact on what's ahead for Michigan politics the next two years:

Turnout:

The turnout of about 5.1 million voters was a record high, representing 68% of Michigan's 7.4 million registered voters. The highest such percentage was nearly 73% in 1960, when there were 3.4 million registered voters.

Northern Michigan accounted for half of the top 10 counties in the November 4 turnout percentages of registered voters. The rankings and percentages follow:

Leelanau, second, at 77.27% (its Glen Arbor township had 84% and has on occasion been tops statewide among townships); Keweenaw, fourth, at 75%; Benzie, sixth, at 74.98%; Grand Traverse, eighth, at 73.87%; Antrim, ninth, at 72.95%.

Ottawa, with 79.11%, led the state.

Michigan House:

Democrats picked up nine seats, bringing their majority edge to a commanding 67-43. Two of the nine pickups were Up North – Dan Scripps in the 101st covering Benzie, Leelanau, Manistee, and Mason counties, and Judy Nerat in the 108th covering Delta, Dickinson, and Menominee.

Nerat took the seat held by term-limited Tom Casperson (R-Escanaba); Scripps the seat of term-limited David Palsrok (R-Manistee).

Scripps was among five winning Democratic contenders in the nine-pickup districts who benefited from nearly $1 million worth of ads and other help from the Michigan Coalition for Progress, largely financed by Kalamazoo billionaire Jon Stryker.

U.S. House:

All three veteran and victorious northern congressmen are returning to prominent roles.

Eight-term 1st District Representative Bart Stupak (D-Menominee), who had a 65% - 35% victory over Casperson, chairs the Oversight and Investigations subcommittee of the Energy Committee chaired by his Capitol Hill mentor and dean of the House, 26-term Representative John Dingell (D-Dearborn). Stupak is the point man in helping Dingell fight an effort by Representative Henry Waxman (D-California), to replace Dingell, long Michigan's most influential voice in Congress.

Eight-term 2nd District Representative Pete Hoekstra (R-Holland), who had a 62% - 35% victory over Fred Johnson, is the ranking minority member of the House Intelligence Committee. He has not hesitated to criticize a Republican president and will be an important voice when Democrats take over the White House and increase their majority come January.

Nine-term 4th District Representative Dave Camp (R-Midland), winner by a 62% - 36% edge over Andrew Concannon, is a GOP whip in the House and has a good shot at becoming the ranking Republican on the powerful House Ways and Means Committee.

George Weeks retired in 2006 after 22 years as political columnist for The Detroit News. His weekly Michigan Politics column is syndicated by Superior Features.

The St. Ignace News
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The quotation under the flag of *The St. Ignace News* on Page 1 is from the 10 triads written by Dr. Fred Newton Scott, creator and teacher of the first continuous course in journalism in the United States at the University of Michigan in 1890. The 10 triads are chiseled on the parapet of the Detroit News Building at 615 Lafayette Boulevard, Detroit. They were headed "Ideals of the Press" or "The Newspaper in a Free Society," and serve as a reminder of what a free press means to us.

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All responsible letters will be considered for publication and may be edited. They must be signed and a telephone number must be included for verification. Personal thank-you notes, personal attacks against other people, form letters, and letters promoting political candidates are not accepted, although letters for or against ballot proposals are welcome.

Obituaries:
The St. Ignace News maintains a policy of not charging for obituaries and we do often add information or rewrite them for clarity and reader interest. Obituaries that the family wants published exactly as submitted can be placed in the newspaper for $75. Photographs are welcome at no charge.

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