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Task force unveils plan to combat prescription drug abuse

By Gary Taylor, Orlando Sentinel

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Genevieve Fraser knows first hand the dangers of prescription drug abuse.

In April 2010, her then 20-year-old sister, Rhiannon, died of an overdose, cutting short her life which already included performing as an opera singer and was soon to include a career in the U.S. Army.

Fraser, 23, shared her story Wednesday as members of the Substance Abuse Task Force for Volusia and Flagler Counties unveiled a community-based initiative targeting the growing prescription drug problem.

"Using a holistic approach, the task force program will incorporate virtually every sector of the community, including children, parents, law enforcement, lawmakers, local government, clergy, the medical community, schools, health and human services and treatment providers," Volusia County Sheriff's spokesman Gary Davidson said.

The initiative, which has been in the works for more than seven months, is the first of its kind in Volusia and Flagler counties, he said.

The first big step will be a community forum scheduled for Oct. 27 in Daytona Beach, said Mark Jones, chairman of the task force and chief executive officer of the Community Partnership for Children.

Jones said the task force started with three organizations and has now grown to 50 organizations and more than 80 members.

"The task force has reached out to every sector of the community to define the impact of prescription drug abuse here in our neighborhoods," he said.

Volusia County Sheriff Ben Johnson said seven people die each day in Florida because of prescription drug abuse, but Dr. Marie Herrmann, chief medical examiner for Volusia and Seminole counties, said it is as much a local problem as a state problem.

Herrmann said in 2010 her office investigated 750 of the 6,124 deaths reported in Volusia County and 99 of them involved prescription drug abuse, a 37.5 percent increase over 2009. Those deaths weren't just overdoses, she said. They included traffic fatalities caused by drivers under the influence of prescription drugs and suicides, Herrmann said.

Reggie Williams, an administrator for the Florida Department of Children and Families, said a six-month study of children removed from homes in Volusia and Flagler counties showed almost 70 percent of the cases involved prescription drug abuse.

State Sen Evelyn Lynn called for a hotline – perhaps local at first but eventually statewide – to allow people to anonymously report prescription drug abuse.

That may have saved her sister's life, Fraser said.

Her sister and mother were having a late-night meal when a friend sent her a text massaging saying she needed help and that her boyfriend had kicked her out.

Rhiannon Fraser picked up her friend and drove her to a home in the Ormond Beach area, where it turned out a party was going on. She overdosed on prescription drugs at the party.

"We don't know if she got them for free or paid for them," Fraser said.

But at least four people the girl considered to be friends saw her in an overdose state and did not call for help because they were afraid of getting in trouble. It was hours later, after she was already dead, that 911 was called.

"Calling my mom [to tell her that Rhiannon was dead] was the most difficult thing I've ever had to do in my life," Fraser said.

While several of the people in the house when her sister overdosed have been arrested before and since, no one has ever been charged in the death, Fraser said.

"Prescription drugs are a deadly weapon," she said.

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