

# The Sunday Oregonian

OP ED

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By DWIGHT C. HOLTON

## Oregon's drug problem: Social programs, schools can help beat addiction



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Earlier this month, Multnomah County District Attorney Michael Schruck and I announced the arrest of two alleged drug dealers in conjunction with the deaths of Joshua Reeves and Patrick McGinnis -- young Oregonians who died from heroin overdoses. The defendants are alleged to have supplied the heroin that led to the deaths of these men, and they would not have been caught without the tireless efforts of local police and federal agents.

We pursued these defendants in part to send a message to criminals who deal drugs: You will be held accountable -- law enforcement is coming for you.

But it is imperative to recognize that prosecution and incarceration alone cannot fix our community's drug problem.

Patrick McGinnis' father told The Oregonian that the drug "war" cannot be won through the criminal justice system alone. He's right. We in law enforcement stand shoulder to shoulder with those who believe that we must focus greater efforts on drug-abuse prevention, treatment and recovery, support for families and support for schools.

Drugs are wiping out people in this state at an alarming rate. There were more than 100 drug overdose deaths in Multnomah County last year. The problem hits rural communities hard as well. Just last week, there were four heroin overdoses -- one fatal -- in Lincoln County. All in all, there were 229 drug-related deaths in Oregon in 2008. To put this in perspective, there were 82 murders in Oregon that year, so the death rate from overdose was nearly three times the death rate from murder.

The actual deaths are just one aspect of the devastation. Each death has a ripple effect, spreading pain, sadness, frustration and even guilt through the victim's family and friends. A parent of an overdose victim recently told me, "the 'what ifs' I ask myself will just never end."

Of course, there also is the damage that results from addiction in general. Drug-addicted people commit crimes to finance their habits and often are involved in the child welfare system. Relationships sour, the ability to hold a job evaporates, our health system is taxed, our law enforcement is stressed, and deadly cycles spin families into despair. And this leaves a huge tab for the taxpayers in criminal justice and health care costs.

We should begin by approaching addiction as a chronic condition. With effective treatment and recovery support, the prospects for success are quite good. Part and parcel of this is help for families of people with addictions. As the families of Joshua Reeves and Patrick McGinnis told *The Oregonian*, their sons had struggled for years with addiction, exhausting them emotionally and physically. We need to give families the support they need to ensure that they can be there to help pull their loved ones back from the abyss. And for people in recovery who are already in the criminal justice system, re-entry courts provide intensive supervision post-jail that gives them hope -- helping them become productive -- and avoid returning to crime.

Second, we must build and support evidence-based prevention programs. We know that environments in which children can build confidence, resilience and focus are those in which they thrive. The same programs that keep kids away from alcohol and drugs are those that keep them from the full range of anti-social behaviors.

Finally, we need to give our schools the support they need to offer a challenging, exciting, fun -- and safe -- place to be. Teens working with the Oregon Partnership's Community Action to Reduce Substance Abuse program explain that making school a cool place to be is the way to keep our kids engaged and learning, rather than detached and using. The support we give our schools is an investment that saves us resources fighting drug addiction and crime down the road.

These community-building efforts are not the whole story, of course. Law enforcement plays a critical, often unseen role. Local police and federal agents have successfully broken up many of the large drug-trafficking organizations that are responsible for the flow of cheap heroin that predatory dealers are using to keep people on the needle. But this is an insidious problem. We'll continue to do our part; I give you that commitment. For the most part, though, law enforcement steps in where the community has otherwise failed.

I love my job -- chasing "bad guys" is what I have done for my entire legal career. But if we build effective recovery and prevention networks, help challenged families and support our schools, it just might put me out of a job someday. And that's OK by me.

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