

## **Opioids fuel Ohio's overflowing morgues: Like much of U.S., state overwhelmed by drug epidemic**

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By about 3 p.m. on a recent Friday, a county morgue in east Ohio was already full -- and more bodies were expected.

Rick Walters, an investigator for the Stark County coroner's office, had just left for two death scenes: a suicide and an overdose.

He called the director of the Ohio Emergency Management Agency for help. He needed more space, he explained -- specifically, a cold-storage trailer to act as an overflow morgue.

As with much of the United States, Ohio is in the throes of a heroin and opioid epidemic that shows no signs of abating.

The recent request for a cold-storage trailer highlights the epidemic ravaging the state.

Drug overdoses have led to a spike in the number of bodies coming to the Stark County morgue -- an increase of about 20 percent in the last year. The additional bodies led to the need for more space, so the coroner's office borrowed a trailer from the state.

"I've been involved in public safety for 40 some years; I remember the drug problem we had in the late '60s and early '70s when I joined the department," Walters said. "The fatality numbers are nothing even close to this."

Last year, the coroner's office processed about 500 deaths, more than 100 of which were drug-related, Walters said.

Statewide, the numbers are staggering. According to the Ohio Department of Health, the number of opioid-related deaths skyrocketed from 296 in 2003 to 2,590 in 2015 -- a 775 percent jump over a 13-year period. The numbers include deaths involving prescription opioids, heroin and fentanyl, which is similar to morphine but 50 to 100 times more potent.

Behind the bleak statistics are haunting scenes of overdose victims.

Several times in recent months, Ohio has been the setting for such shocking spectacles.

In September, authorities in the town of East Liverpool stopped a car and found a man and a woman barely conscious in the front seats. The woman's 4-year-old grandson sat in the back seat.

A disturbing photo of the scene -- the driver with his head tilted back, the woman slumped across the passenger seat, and the boy staring at what's in front of him -- spread like wildfire.

Weeks later, in northeast Ohio, a recovering addict delivered some devastating news to his 8-year-old son.

"Mommy died last night," Brenden Clark said. "OK?"

"What do you mean? My mom?" his son said.

"Yes," Clark said.

"How!" the boy cried out.

"From drugs," Clark said.

Clark posted video of the heart-wrenching discussion on Facebook, where it has been viewed more than 35 million times.

In Stark County, where the population had outgrown the morgue, the drug problem has been especially taxing, Walters said.

The morgue can house only 12 bodies at a time. That's small for a county with a population of more than 375,000, Walters said.

The drug epidemic also has caused the county to spend roughly \$75,000 a year in toxicology tests alone, Walters said. In some months, the county racks up \$10,000 in toxicology bills.

Walters said the cold-storage trailer arrived late Friday night in Canton, Ohio, where the coroner's office is located. Designed for use with disaster scenes or mass-fatality illnesses, it is loaded with trays about 20 inches wide and 7 feet long and can hold 18 bodies.

Since calling the state to request the trailer, the coroner's office has seen at least six more deaths, two of which are possibly drug-related, Walters said.

Other counties in the state have also had to find additional space after their morgues reached capacity.

Summit County in northeastern Ohio borrowed mobile storage trailers from the state last year. Gary Guenther, chief investigator for the Summit County medical examiner's office, said the number of deaths began to increase on July 4, with most cases involving drugs laced with carfentanil, an elephant tranquilizer 10,000 times more powerful than morphine.

Around the same time last year, Cincinnati saw an unprecedented number of heroin overdoses: 174 in six days.

The culprit was also carfentanil mixed with heroin, The Washington Post's Katie Mettler reported. The Hamilton County coroner's office in Cincinnati saw a 100-day backlog of DNA testing for police drug investigations, the Associated Press reported.

Kent Harshbarger, the coroner in Ohio's Montgomery County, said earlier this year that he was considering renting space at funeral homes and hospitals because the county didn't have enough space in its morgue, even after expanding in 2016, WDTN reported.

Over the past few years, Ohio has had one of the highest rates of drug overdose in the country. It was among the top five states in 2015, along with West Virginia, New Hampshire, Kentucky and Rhode Island, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.