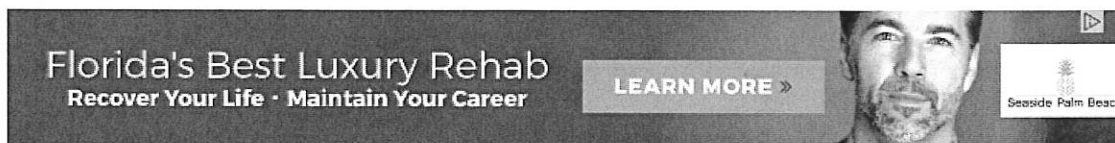


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Milwaukee County panel backs hiring legal experts to file suits against opioid drug makers

Don Behm, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 11:57 a.m. CT Oct. 19, 2017 | Updated 5:11 p.m. CT Oct. 19, 2017



(Photo: courtesy Laura Haas)

Laura Haas is happy Milwaukee County is taking the first steps toward confronting the opioid industry in court.

"They need to do everything they can to try and help stop this epidemic" of overdose deaths and addiction, said Haas, who is going through recovery from oxycodone and heroin addiction. She is employed as a peer specialist for mental health and substance abuse at [United Community Center](http://www.unitedcc.org/index.htm) (<http://www.unitedcc.org/index.htm>) in Milwaukee.

Milwaukee County's growing opioid crisis has prompted a panel of supervisors to endorse hiring legal experts to prepare lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies and distributors suspected of contributing to an opioid epidemic.

The County Board's judiciary committee on Thursday recommended board approval of Corporation Counsel Margaret Daun's request to bring in outside counsel to initiate one or more lawsuits to recover some costs of battling the epidemic. The board meets Nov. 2.

"Our citizens are suffering and dying," Daun said Thursday.

For Haas, 61, her descent into addiction started with surgery for a broken knee seven years ago, she said. She received a prescription for oxycodone, sold as OxyContin, for a full year after the surgery and physical therapy.

The prescription ended at the same time as the final therapy session. "Within 24 hours, I was deathly sick," Haas said. She was going through drug withdrawal.

"I received an oxycodone pill from an acquaintance and the withdrawal symptoms went away," she said.

Companies that have repeatedly testified before Congress that these prescription painkillers would not be addictive, as well as distributors that ship such extreme volumes of the drugs into communities that the availability feeds a secondary black market, should be held accountable, Daun said.

"It is harder for a person under 18 to buy alcohol than it is to buy opioids," Daun said.

Haas agreed.

She started buying opioid pills off the street rather than facing withdrawal again. "They are plentiful," she said. Her growing addiction changed her life.

After losing her job, she was unable to buy more pills. She switched to less expensive heroin, and retail theft to sustain her. She became homeless and ended up in jail.

She credits the county's drug treatment court and a referral to the United Community Center's residential treatment program with helping to end her downfall before it was too late.

The corporation counsel's office is tracking lawsuits in Chicago; Dayton, Ohio; Suffolk County, N.Y., and other communities and would hire a law firm with experience, she said.

Chicago's lawsuit is progressing following a federal judge's rejection of the industry's motion to dismiss the complaint, Daun said.

Outside legal counsel would be paid only if the county receives a financial settlement as a result of claims made against the companies, under terms of the resolution proposed by Daun.

"We pay nothing up front," Daun said Thursday.

The Milwaukee County medical examiner estimates there will be more than 325 opioid overdose deaths in the county this year.

The office expects to record 426 drug-related deaths in 2017, a nearly 25% increase from the 343 deaths last year.

"Milwaukee County has experienced a tremendous loss of lives," Supervisor Peggy West said in support of the request.

"We will try to redress these wrongs," Daun said.

The county has spent millions of dollars on programs and services aimed at curbing the crisis and widespread addiction to painkillers, according to Daun. West agreed that the epidemic has placed a costly burden on nearly all county services, from public and behavioral health to the medical examiner and law enforcement.

Related: [Milwaukee County weighs lawsuits against drug-makers, distributors for costs of opioid epidemic](#)

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Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele's recommended 2018 county budget includes \$1.1 million in new spending targeting the local opioid crisis and addiction.

The plan includes adding two employees — a forensic chemist and forensic pathologist — for the medical examiner's office to respond to an increased volume of autopsies due to overdose deaths.

The medical examiner's office also would purchase an advanced mass spectrometer instrument to reduce the time required for screening drugs by 80%, and provide that information to law enforcement and public health officials. The county and City of Milwaukee would split the \$400,000 cost of the equipment.

In 2018, the Behavioral Health Division would boost spending on the county's AODA (Alcohol and Other Drug Addiction) residential treatment program by \$700,000, under the budget plan. The program serves county residents ages 18 to 59 with a history of alcohol or other drug abuse.

The division also receives \$200,000 to establish a non-medical, peer-run respite program to help people deal with a short-term crisis and connect them to other services.



Milwaukee County Corporation
Counsel Margaret Daun. (Photo:
handout photo, Milwaukee Journal
Sentinel)

More than two dozen states, cities and counties in the U.S. already have filed lawsuits against drug companies, as well as drugstore chains.

Among the companies targeted in those legal actions: Purdue Pharma, maker of OxyContin and Dilaudid; Endo Pharmaceuticals, maker of Percocet and Percodan; Janssen Pharmaceuticals, maker of a fentanyl skin patch; and Cephalon Inc., maker of a fentanyl lozenge.

Fentanyl is a pain medication 50 times more powerful than heroin.

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