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D.E.A., V.I.P.D. and Dept. of Health Sound the Alarm as Use of Deadly Synthetic Opioid Fentanyl Grows in USVI

Health / **Published On February 05, 2020 04:58 AM /**

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A drug addict prepares heroine by placing a fentanyl test strip into the mixing container to check for contamination. By. AP/ BEBETO MATHEWS

Virgin Islands law enforcement and health officials issued a grave warning Tuesday: Anyone who takes the little blue pills being pushed illegally on the streets as the opioid pain-reliever, OxyContin, risks losing their life.

At least four fatal overdoses on St. Croix and other, non-fatal overdoses in recent months have authorities cautioning the public – and scrambling to stem the surge of the fentanyl-laced drugs into the territory.

Investigators believe blue pills being trafficked as the OxyContin are, in reality, counterfeit tablets containing fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is deadly in quantities as small as two milligrams.

‘Like Playing Russian Roulette with Your Life’

“A lot of the users of these drugs do not know they are taking drugs that contain fentanyl,” said Tracey Gardner, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency’s St. Croix outpost. “Taking these drugs is like playing Russian roulette with your life.”

The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the Virgin Islands Police Department and the V.I. Department of Health collectively outlined impact of opioids in the territory during a St. Croix press conference on Tuesday.

Police Commissioner Trevor Velinor said opioid use hasn’t reached the crisis proportions that have devastated some parts of the U.S. mainland, but the current trend is worrisome. “We don’t want to send the message that everyone is utilizing (opioids), but there have been quantities of this drug in the territory,” he said. “There is enough of the drug in the territory that it adversely impacts the community.”

According to Mr. Velinor, there have been fatal and non-fatal overdoses since the fall. Some of the incidents involved fentanyl-laced OxyContin, although other illicit drugs have been found containing fentanyl, authorities said. “We want to address forcefully, collaboratively,” he said.

Ms. Gardner would not discuss in any detail how fentanyl is making its way into the territory, although there have been some seizures of fentanyl mailed to the territory, she said.

St. Croix, so far, has been hardest hit by fentanyl overdoses. Mr. Velinor said transplants moving to St. Croix for work may be influencing the flow of drugs. “I cannot say it is because of the refinery ... But there is probably some influences there,” he said. “When people come into the territory, they sometimes bring their ills with them.”

Fentanyl is mixed with illicit drugs other than OxyContin. It can be up to 100 times more potent than morphine, and 30 to 50 times more potent than heroin.

The Department of Health is rolling out a public health campaign to alert the public about signs of opioid use and to direct those who may be using it to seek help before it’s too late. Dept. of Health Deputy Commissioner of Public Health, Renan Steele, said another reason for the growing concern is the mixing of fentanyl with a number of other drugs, among them heroine and, of particular concern for the territory, he said, is marijuana. "Currently what's been happening is you can find fentanyl laced in any illicit drug that's out there on the market. A lot of times it is in pill form, but there's been instances — not in the territory but on the mainland and we don't want to see it coming to our shores —[where] fentanyl is laced in marijuana as well," Mr. Steele said.

The outreach program provides drug users with counseling and medication to keep them away from the illicit drugs. While on the program, the patients are monitored and provided a number of other services, along with referrals to the department's outpatient clinic for ongoing counseling support, Mr. Steele said.