

Massachusetts Police Chiefs Want Feds to Help Stem Flow of Opioids

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FEBRUARY 22, 2019

ACCESSED FROM: [HTTPS://WWW.OFFICER.COM/COMMAND-HQ/NEWS/21069588/MASSACHUSETTS-POLICE-CHIEFS-WANT-FEDS-TO-HELP-STEM-FLOW-OF-OPIOIDS](https://www.officer.com/command-hq/news/21069588/massachusetts-police-chiefs-want-feds-to-help-stem-flow-of-opioids)

BOSTON HERALD



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LAWRENCE POLICE DEPARTMENT

LAWRENCE, Massachusetts -- Merrimack Valley police chiefs say choking off the fentanyl supply in their communities will require federal action as the deadly opiate continues to pour onto their streets from other countries.

“We can’t stop it on the local level. All we can do is street-level enforcement and prevention and education in schools,” Lawrence police Chief Roy Vasque said. “You’re not going to stop it unless it’s really a nationwide, comprehensive plan.”

Vasque’s comments come days after a 1-year-old Lawrence girl was hospitalized for fentanyl exposure and her parents charged with trafficking the drug. It was the second time a Merrimack Valley child has been exposed to the lethal narcotic in as many months; 11-year-old Precious Wallaces of Haverhill died in December after police said she ingested the drug.

Fighting the opioid epidemic is a top priority for both U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling in Boston and the Drug Enforcement Administration's New England Field Division.

Federal authorities in Massachusetts seized an "astounding total" of more than 73 kilograms of fentanyl and heroin in a six-week period between October and November 2018, most of which came from Greater Lawrence, Lelling said.

"We know that cheap fentanyl from China and Mexico continues to enter the commonwealth at an alarming rate," Lelling said, adding that his office routinely works with state and local law enforcement "to target and arrest traffickers."

DEA spokesman Timothy Desmond said his agency is "targeting the world's biggest and most powerful drug traffickers and their organizations." He said the DEA also works with local, state, federal and tribal partners to "stem the flow of these drugs into our region."

U.S. Rep. Lori Trahan (D-Westford) said there was "no question that fentanyl is just exacerbating the problem and contributing to fatalities" and that "we have to be vigilant about getting fentanyl off our streets."

Trahan, part of the Freshmen Working Group on Addiction, sat down with law enforcement officials, medical providers and advocates from across the Merrimack Valley in Methuen on Thursday for a roundtable discussion on how to better fight the opioid crisis.

The advocates pushed for more treatment beds and added funding for long-term recovery and support, as well as partnering with and potentially regulating sober homes.

Vasque and Methuen police Chief Joseph Solomon asked Trahan to consider letting communities dictate the type of federal funding they need to combat the epidemic.

"If they don't listen to us ... they're going to give us funding for something we don't need," Vasque said.

Advocate Phil Lahey of Methuen said he hoped those at the grassroots level could become more involved in the legislative process.

“Once everybody leaves this table, I’m sorry, it’s business as usual,” Lahey said. “By the time things get to the state legislator or the federal legislator, they’ve been watered down so much.”

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