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South Jersey TIMES



'PRAY FOR US'

SURVIVORS OF A TORNADO THAT DROVE THROUGH THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA ASSESS THE TASK THAT AWAITS THEM AS THEY START TO REBUILD THEIR DEVASTATED TOWNS. **A4**

WAR ON DRUGS

As fentanyl overdoses rise, states lean toward harsher penalties



Anthony Delio, 36, falls asleep standing up in an alley after smoking fentanyl in Los Angeles last year. Ingesting 2 milligrams of fentanyl can be fatal, meaning 1 gram — about the same as a paper clip — could contain 500 lethal doses. More than 107,000 Americans died of drug overdoses in 2021, a record, and two-thirds of those deaths were caused by fentanyl. *Jae C. Hong, Associated Press file*

OPERATION BLUE LOTUS

The Department of Homeland Security has intensified efforts to stop fentanyl trafficking across the border, launching Operation Blue Lotus with hundreds of U.S. agents and scanning technology.

90%

The focus is on land crossings where more than 90% of fentanyl seizures along the border have occurred since the start of the 2023 fiscal year on Oct. 1.

900 POUNDS

Between its launch on March 13 and March 19, Operation Blue Lotus led to 18 arrests and the seizure of more than 900 pounds of fentanyl, 700 pounds of methamphetamines, and more than 100 pounds of cocaine.

Sources: *Washington Post*; DHS.

The strategy is alarming recovery advocates who say focusing on the criminal angle of drugs has historically backfired.

Gabe Stern, James Pollard and Geoff Mulvihill *Associated Press*

State lawmakers nationwide are responding to the deadliest overdose crisis in U.S. history by pushing harsher penalties for possessing fentanyl and other powerful lab-made opioids that are connected to about 70,000 deaths a year.

Imposing longer prison sentences for possessing smaller amounts of drugs represents a shift in states that in recent years have rolled back drug possession penalties. Proponents of tougher penalties say this crisis is different and that, in most places, the stiffer sentences are intended to punish drug dealers, not just users.

“There is no other drug — no other illicit drug — that has the same type of effects on our communities,” said Mark Jackson, the district attorney for Douglas County, Nevada, and president of the Nevada District Attorneys Association, which is pushing for stricter penalties for fentanyl-related crimes.

But the strategy is alarming recovery advocates who say focusing on the criminal angle of drugs has historically backfired, including when lawmakers elevated crack cocaine penalties in the 1980s.

“Every time we treat drugs as a law

enforcement problem and push stricter laws, we find that we punish people in ways that destroy their lives and make it harder for them to recover later on,” said Adam Wandt, an assistant professor of public policy at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. He said people behind bars often continue getting drugs — often without receiving quality addiction treatment — then emerge to find it’s harder to get work.

Since 2020, drug overdoses are now linked to more than 100,000 deaths a year nationally, with about two-thirds of them fentanyl-related. That’s more than 10 times as many drug deaths as in 1988, at the height of the crack epidemic.

Fentanyl mostly arrives in the U.S. from Mexico and is mixed into supplies of other drugs, including cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine and counterfeit oxycodone pills. Some users seek it out. Others don’t know they’re taking it.

Ingesting 2 milligrams of fentanyl can be fatal, meaning 1 gram — about the same as a paper clip — could contain 500 lethal doses.

That’s what’s driving some lawmakers to crack down with harsh penalties, along with adopting measures such as legalizing materials to test drug supplies for fentanyl and distributing naloxone, a drug that can reverse overdoses.

Before this year’s legislative sessions began, a dozen states had already adopted fentanyl possession measures, **SEE NARCOTICS, A3**

STATEHOUSE

State panel on predatory banking comes up empty

Lawmakers created a commission to study the issue, but 3 years later no one has been appointed to it.

Karin Price Mueller *For South Jersey Times*

No one knows for sure how many people in New Jersey don’t have bank accounts.

Or how many have accounts, but still use non-bank facilities for cashing checks, taking payday loans and finding other services that are not typically consumer friendly and are often more expensive than a traditional bank or credit union.

That kind of information about state residents could help financial institutions and government agencies find new ways to assist the so-called unbanked and underbanked, advocates say.

State lawmakers passed a bill to create a commission to study the issue and give recommendations just before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was signed by Gov. Phil Murphy on Jan. 13, 2020.

It tasked officials with naming the commission within 60 days of the bill’s signing. Its first meeting was to happen within 30 days of the appointments, and it would present a report, with recommendations, **SEE COMMISSION, A3**

DEPTFORD TOWNSHIP

Officer injured in shooting remains in ICU

Nicolas Fernandes *For South Jersey Times*

A police officer injured in a South Jersey shooting remains in intensive care more than two weeks later, police said.

Bobby Shisler, a patrol officer with the Deptford Township Police Department, suffered “critical life-threatening injuries” after being shot on Friday, March 10, according to the New Jersey State Policemen’s Benevolent Association. He was rushed to Cooper University Hospital for emergency surgery and was later listed in stable condition, the PBA said.

The Deptford Township Police Department posted an update on social media on Saturday, saying that he is still in the ICU.

“Please keep our Officer, P.O. Bobby Shisler in your prayers. He’s still in Cooper’s Trauma ICU and he’s fighting hard to recover!!” the post read.

SEE DEPTFORD TOWNSHIP, A3

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