



LOCAL

Manatee ready to sue opioid makers over epidemic's cost

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BRADENTON — Manatee County, the epicenter of the opioid epidemic in Florida, will join the growing number of local governments in Florida suing drug makers to recover some of what the county has paid for everything from the drugs that reverse the effects of an overdose to autopsies.

On Tuesday, commissioners unanimously voted to direct County Attorney Mickey Palmer to choose an outside law firm and file a lawsuit in either circuit or federal court against one or several opioid manufacturers and distributors. They also agreed to a 25 percent contingency fee.

Two commissioners, Carol Whitmore and Vanessa Baugh, were uncertain with what a lawsuit would seek to do.

“To me, these guys are a bunch of ambulance chasers,” Whitmore said.

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Baugh agreed with her colleague, adding, “The manufacturers, I don’t know, are the ones at fault.”

Since Manatee County has been among the areas in Florida hardest hit by the current epidemic, Commissioner Charles Smith said it’s important they follow through with this lawsuit.

“For us to go on record saying we’re not going to support this, this will change your commission life forever,” Smith said.

Palmer said he had interviewed three groups of law firms. The first is made up of New York-based firms Napoli Shkolnik and Stull Stull & Brody, as well as Branstetter Stranch & Jennings from Nashville, Ventura Law from Danbury, Conn., and Tampa-based Trenam Law.

Another group is made up of Washington, D.C.-based Motley Rice and Whittemore Law Group of St. Petersburg.

The final team is made up of Baron & Budd from Dallas and Levin Papantonio from Pensacola.

Palmer said it was too early to estimate how much money the county would seek with a lawsuit.

A lawsuit, according to Palmer, would seek three things:

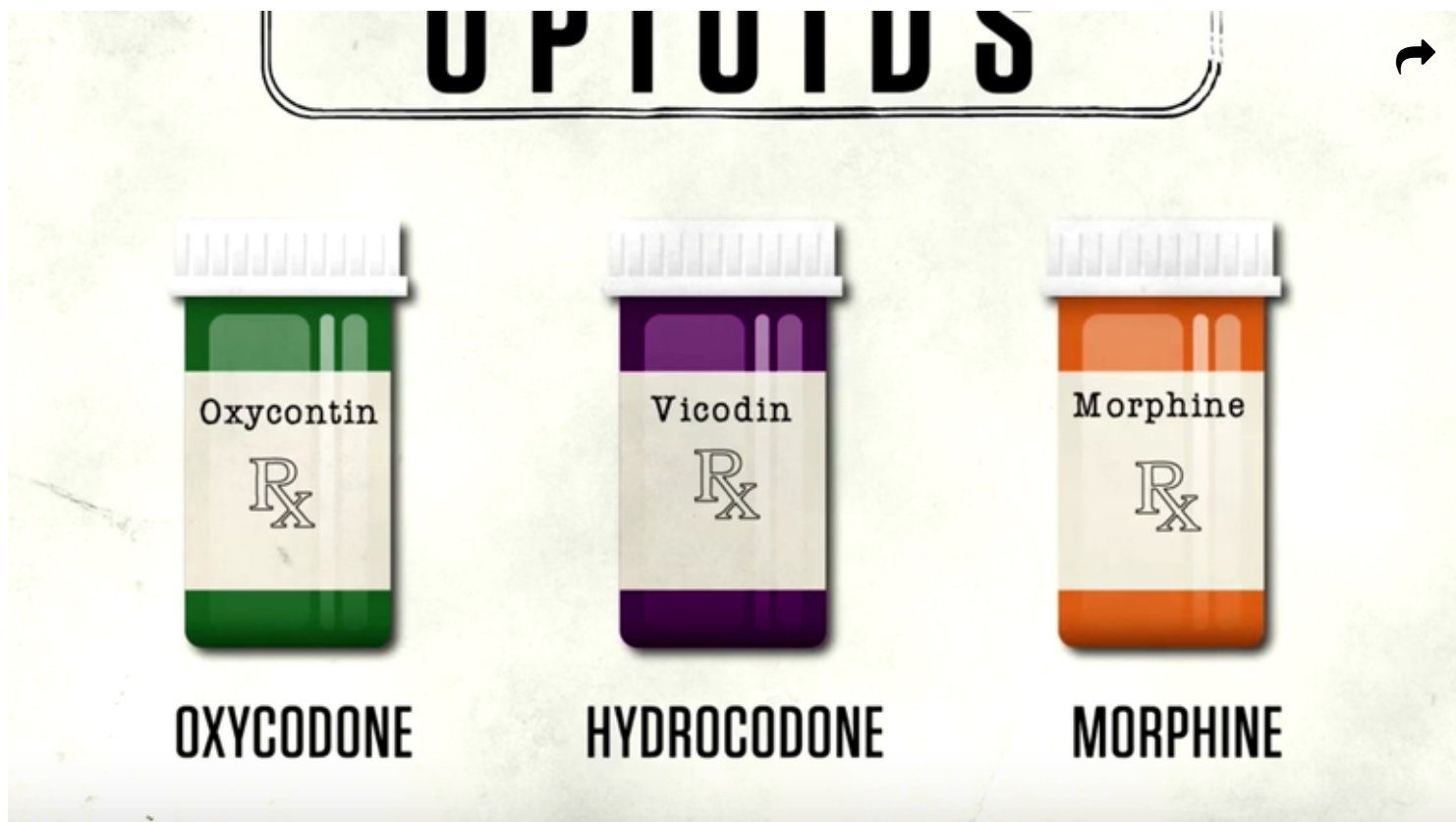
- Compensation for all the costs associated with the epidemic, from healthcare, to purchasing overdose-reversal substance naloxone, jail costs, first responders, drug court, autopsies and more.
- Funding to help reverse and treat the epidemic with addiction services, rehabilitation and education.

- The end of fraudulent marketing tactics by opioid manufacturers and distributors, such as not being truthful about the addictive qualities of their products.

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The city of Delray Beach was one of the first municipalities to sue drug companies. The counties of Alachua, Palm Beach, Miami-Dade, Escambia, Broward, Pasco and a slew of others have followed suit, or indicated they will soon do so.

Cocaine and fentanyl analogs like carfentanil, a large animal tranquilizer 5,000 times more potent than heroin, were responsible for rates of death greater than 25 people per 100,000 population, according to the most recent Florida Department of Law Enforcement Medical Examiners Commission drug death report.

Manatee County has taken some steps to address the epidemic. Manatee Memorial Hospital and Lakewood Ranch Medical Center addressed their role in the addiction cycle, recently announcing they would make it more difficult for patients to get narcotics in the emergency room.

The county also received \$500,000 from the state legislature last year to fund an opioid peer pilot program, which will match recovering addicts with professionals with lived experience. Naloxone supply has been expanded for deployment to firefighters, police officers and most recently Florida Highway Patrol troopers.

Gov. Rick Scott was in Bradenton on Monday to sign HB 21, which will limit certain prescription opioids to three days, as well as spell out funding measures for more naloxone, services from the Florida Department of Children and Families and medication-assisted treatment.



Monday, Gov. Rick Scott signed legislation that will supply funding for the opioid epidemic. Manatee County Sheriff Rick Wells said opioids are still in the area and six of the seven overdose deaths so far this year have been opioid-related. Sara Nealeigh — Bradenton Herald

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