

S.B. Suing Big Pharma?

First District Supervisor Das Williams is hoping Santa Barbara County will take on Big Pharma. A growing number of government entities throughout the nation have sued pharmaceutical companies for overprescribing painkillers, accusing them of driving the nation's opioid epidemic. The effort mimics one against Big Tobacco in the 1990s, after which tobacco companies agreed to pay for anti-smoking campaigns and change advertising practices.

"Our [public service] costs are being created by pharmaceutical companies," Williams said in an interview. "They are increasingly seen to have ill will in that they were pushing these drugs harder than appropriate." The number of narcotic overdose deaths has crept up in Santa Barbara County in recent years, according to county drug and alcohol expert John Doyel. Last year, there were 60 deaths, he said. In addition, Cottage Health's three hospitals reported a nearly 300 percent increase in overdose cases in emergency rooms from 2005-2016.

The possibility of Santa Barbara County pursuing a lawsuit against drug companies was discussed at November's Behavioral Wellness Commission meeting, said chair Sharon Byrne. It would require a two-thirds vote at the Board of Supervisors.

Although the opioid crisis has not been as crippling in California as it has been in



Supervisor Das Williams

PAUL WELLMAN FILE PHOTO

the Midwest and the South, the western state has not been immune. Three years ago, Orange and Santa Clara counties filed a lawsuit against five drug companies alleging that the corporations downplayed the painkillers' addictive risks, according to the Associated Press. Teva Pharmaceutical Inc. agreed to pay \$1.6 million for substance abuse treatment programs. Counties in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Ohio, and New York, among many others, have filed similar lawsuits in state courts.

Williams acknowledged that it is difficult to quantify the havoc created by these drug corporations. But he doesn't see a downside to filing litigation, he said. "The downside could be an investment of time, but our jail costs and public safety costs are a significant driver of our overall costs. If we don't get more revenue we'll face an erosion in our public safety."

—Kelsey Brugger

Inmates in Need

Of the 1,051 inmates locked up in Santa Barbara County Jail on October 20, 544 of them — or 52 percent — had been enrolled at some point as mental-health patients with the county's Department of Behavioral Wellness. Of those, 170 were currently enrolled. "I expected the numbers to be high, but that's higher than even I expected," said Behavioral Wellness boss Alice Gleghorn, who noted her department only treats people with serious to acute mental-health problems. "We don't do mild to moderate." Likewise, Gleghorn noted that 47 percent of the population had been enrolled at some point in substance-abuse treatment programs.

Gleghorn said 39 percent of the jail's population reported having "co-occurring disorders," meaning they struggled with both substance-abuse and mental-health issues seriously enough to have sought help from Behavioral Wellness at some time in the past. Of the 1,051 inmates, Gleghorn noted, no fewer than 626 sought help with one or both problems. Only 2 percent, however, were currently taking psychotropic medications prescribed by Gleghorn's department.

Gleghorn and her staff dredged these numbers as part of the county's broader commitment to a national program known as Stepping Up that's designed to keep people with mental illness out of jail and get them into treatment. Gleghorn unveiled the

data during a two-day retreat held in Santa Barbara earlier this month involving representatives of departments that deal with mentally ill people facing criminal charges, from 9-1-1 dispatchers to Sheriff Bill Brown himself.

As is frequently the case in such multi-agency efforts, this endeavor has given rise to some seriously opaque jargon: "Sequential Intersectional Mapping" is the process by which mentally ill people find themselves behind bars rather than in treatment. Gleghorn explained that involves many key decision points that affect the ultimate outcome. The point of such "mapping," she said, is to determine which steps along the way have the most long-term impact on the largest number of mentally ill people. "The point is keeping people out of jail in the first place. After that, it's to get them into treatment," she said.

National studies clearly indicate that jails and prisons are disproportionately populated with mentally ill people; the same studies also demonstrate that mentally ill inmates tend to stay behind bars disproportionately longer. When Santa Barbara County completes this mapping, Gleghorn said, the next step is to devise a plan. "Are there any low-hanging fruit?" she asked. "Is there any low-cost approach?" The next Sequential Intersectional Mapping meeting takes place in January.

—Nick Welsh