

Pearson buys Narcan for squad cars

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(Photo: Dave Schwarz, dschwarz@stcloudtimes.com)

Christmas Day will be 10 years since Justin Pearson died of an accidental overdose of prescription painkillers.

In the 10 years since, his father has used a foundation in Justin's name to support law enforcement and help others struggling with addiction. Dan Pearson's most recent efforts will do both.

He has spent about \$6,000 to put Narcan into each of the 60 squad cars used by Stearns County Sheriff's Office deputies. Narcan is the brand name for Naloxone, a drug that blocks the effects of opiates and can save the life of someone who overdoses on narcotics such as heroin and fentanyl.

"Christmas Day marks 10 years. That's a milestone for our family," Pearson said Monday. "But now we've got something that we can quantify that will save lives and save lives immediately. And we're ecstatic about it."

It's the culmination of two years of prodding by Pearson to get Narcan into the squads. The sheriff's office initially said no because the Narcan was available only in injectable form and because it had to be kept in a strictly controlled temperature environment of 59-77 degrees, said Chief Deputy Bruce Bechtold.

Now it's a nasal spray, which eliminates deputies having to inject a person with a needle, and deputies have gotten comfortable with having to bring the Narcan inside so it isn't rendered useless, he said.



Two doses of Narcan are included in a kit now available to Stearns County Sheriff's Department officers. (Photo: Dave Schwarz, dschwarz@stcloudtimes.com)

Deputies will attach a small bag containing two Narcan doses to the defibrillators they also carry in their squads. The defibrillators have to be brought inside during cold months as well.

Gold Cross Ambulance personnel have been carrying Narcan for years, but Stearns County is believed to be the first law enforcement agency in Central Minnesota to carry it.

It was common that Gold Cross paramedics would use the Narcan weekly, said Elie Deeb, operations supervisor at Gold Cross in St. Cloud. And emergency room physicians are reporting a spike in patients in St. Cloud using heroin and fentanyl.

Narcan is typically used when the patient is unconscious, Deeb said. If the person experiencing a possible overdose isn't overdosing from an opiate and gets the Narcan, there is little to no negative effect on the patient.



Stearns County Chief Deputy Bruce Bechtold holds two vials of Narcan while announcing the donation of the drug kits to the department by Dan Pearson, right, Monday, Dec. 5, at the Stearns County Law Enforcement Center. (Photo: Dave Schwarz, dschwarz@stcloudtimes.com)

The drug is in high demand, Bechtold said, as some people are getting Narcan because they have family members who are addicted to opiates. And law enforcement is finding another possible use — for themselves.

Drug task force members are coming back from training with stories about officers coming into contact with fentanyl at drug houses. The nasal spray can be used on officers if they were to touch fentanyl and get a high level of that powerful painkiller into their system.

"If they're exposed to fentanyl during an investigation, they can use (Narcan) on their partners or themselves as well," Bechtold said.

Pearson, who owns Pleasureland RV Center, in the past has provided the sheriff's office with an RV for its dive and rescue team, helped pay for a bloodhound for the office, and bought drug drop boxes where people can drop off old or unused prescription medication.

"Dan's been a champion of law enforcement over the years. But I think this is his main cause and that's where his heart is," Bechtold said.

Pearson hopes to expand the availability of Narcan to every law enforcement and first responder agency in Stearns County, he said. He's budgeted \$30,000 from the Justin V. Pearson Foundation to achieve that goal.

"If it takes more, we're not going to stop," he said. "We're going to do what it takes to get Stearns County equipped."

His son was a bright spot, he said, with a beautiful smile and always excited for what was going to happen. Pearson sees this as a bright spot for some family with a loved one who is overdosing and needs help.

When asked whether he thought about what could have happened had Justin had access to Narcan, he said it's something that can't be changed. Sometimes you have to come to the conclusion that things happen for a reason, he said.

"As much as we don't understand it and wish things would be different, what we're not going to do is sit back and let this continue to happen to others," he said. "If there's a way we can get involved and do something about it, we're going to do something about it."