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Lehigh County DA says intelligence and investigation center will pitch in on efforts to curb overdose deaths, improve crisis intervention training

By SARAH M. WOJCIK
THE MORNING CALL | DEC 22, 2020



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The coronavirus' impact on drug overdose deaths and instances of mental health crises has caught the attention of the Lehigh County district attorney.

Jim Martin announced Tuesday that the office's Regional Intelligence and Investigation Center will begin helping the effort to prevent overdose deaths, as well as fine-tune the crisis intervention training provided to Allentown police.

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The RIIC's capabilities for analyzing and sharing data among law enforcement agencies has helped crack cases all over the Lehigh Valley, including homicides and human trafficking.

This latest effort will involve a partnership with the Allentown Health Bureau to funnel data to the Allentown Overdose Fatality Review Team and the Allentown Opioid Task Force and work with local mental health experts to ensure crisis training is as effective as possible.

[Pennsylvania overdose deaths during coronavirus pandemic jump 12%; state data doesn't reflect big increases in Schuylkill, Lehigh counties »](#)

While the Allentown Opioid Task Force has been around since 2015, the Allentown Overdose Fatality Review Team is a new venture. The team, which will begin meetings in the new year, is tasked with reviewing the details surrounding overdose deaths to identify trends.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pennsylvania has seen a 12% jump in overdose deaths. Lehigh County saw a 15% increase in drug deaths in the first six

months of the year compared with 2019, Lehigh County Coroner Eric D. Minnich
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told **The Morning Call**.

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The RIIC can help provide the teams with information about the person who died of an overdose, including toxicology information.

“The information gathered by the RIIC is invaluable as we look for ways to prevent deaths by overdose,” said Vicky Kistler, director of the Allentown Health Bureau.

The work is funded in part by a grant from the state, which will cover the cost of data collection through August 2022.

Another element of the RIIC’s contribution to the effort will be to help the analyze crisis intervention training Lehigh County provides to police. This effort will involve help from Cedar Crest College, the Office of Lehigh County Mental Health and the Adult and Juvenile Probation departments to help educate Allentown police on how best to handle people in the midst of a mental health crisis.

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The hope is that the information can drill down on which skills are most needed

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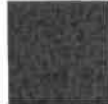


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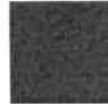
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Wojcik can be reached at 610-778-2283 or swojcik@mcall.com.

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The Morning Call



Sarah M. Wojcik is a reporter covering breaking news, public safety and Northampton County courts. She joined The Morning Call in 2015 after working for more than six years at the Express-Times and lehighvalleylive.com, covering beats ranging from municipal to breaking news. She holds a communications media degree from Lock Haven University.

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