



Health officials providing test strips in fight against fentanyl on Outer Banks

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DARE COUNTY, N.C. — All year long, News 3 has been sharing stories of families torn apart by illicit fentanyl, and going in-depth with law enforcement across Virginia about what's being done to address fentanyl trafficking and distribution in Hampton Roads and beyond.

A big issue has been counterfeit pills.

Health officials on North Carolina's Outer Banks are distributing tools to help tackle an issue impacting many people in Dare County, young and old.

On a Wednesday afternoon, Jesse Ruby loaded up his car with boxes at the Dare County Health and Human Services headquarters in Manteo.

Inside each of Ruby's boxes are tools that could save lives.

“It helps me stay accountable,” Ruby said.

Ruby is a peer support specialist with Dare County Health and Human Services.

News 3 followed Ruby along on his trip to take his tools to TJ's Gas and Grill in Kill Devil Hills.

He said missions like this are personal.

“I, myself, have lived through substance use disorder,” Ruby told News 3. “I know what it's like at times to not be understood or stigmatized.”

Ruby has taken many trips to TJ's and other spots in Dare County to give out items, including fentanyl test kits.

Inside each kit are fentanyl test strips, test strips for the animal tranquilizer xylazine, another illicit drug on the rise, and information on recovery services.

News 3 asked Ruby how the fentanyl test strips work.

“This test strip, you would add to water that has your substance in it. You let that sit in the water for 15 seconds, and within five minutes, you will know if the substance you're using or testing

has fentanyl in it,” Ruby said. “On the back of the packet, you’d have a positive marking one line, and a negative is two lines for the test.”

The kits are a welcomed resource for residents like Cindy Swoope, a clerk at TJ’s.

“It’s been wonderful for the community. It’s saving lives,” Swoope told News 3. “People come up here and talk about it. People come up here and ask for it.”

According to Dare County health officials, in 2021, 82 percent of the county’s deadly drug overdoses were linked to fentanyl.

“Just knowing there could be children that are growing up without a mother and father, or parents growing up [and] going through life without their children because they’re dying from this stuff, it hurts,” Ruby said.

Roxana Ballinger is the Health Education and Community Outreach Manager for Dare County Health and Human Services and the Co-Chair of the county’s Saving Lives Task Force.

The fight against fentanyl is also personal for her.

Last year, her son, David, died of fentanyl poisoning in Hampton Roads.

“He knew he had a drug issue, and he was willing to take the chance because of his overwhelming addiction,” Ballinger told News 3.

For the past year and a half, Ballinger and other Dare County health officials have been giving out fentanyl test strips in areas known as hot spots for fentanyl, identified through data from first responders and community relationships.

“We immediately said we have to get these,” Ballinger said of the fentanyl test strips. “That was the tool that we could use to help people. They could find out what was in their drugs and make that informed decision whether they want to use it or not use it.”

“If you’re using a drug, and you’re not testing it, you’re definitely playing a game of Russian roulette with your life,” Ruby added.

Outside of Dare County, reports show people across the country have had mixed feelings towards fentanyl test strips.

According to the think tank, the Cato Institute, some states have banned the strips and, in some cases, they’re considered “drug paraphernalia.”

However, a report from Axios shows governors in many states have signed legislation legalizing the strips since January 2022.

Also, agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Food & Drug Administration (FDA), and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have said they support fentanyl test strips.

“If there's anything we can do to mitigate overdose, to help people avoid drug poisonings, we should do it,” Jarod Forget, Special Agent In Charge at the DEA Washington Division told News 3. “If there's fentanyl test strips that can help mitigate or raise the level of awareness that an individual knows that may or may not have fentanyl, I think it's a good thing.”

Meanwhile, fentanyl test strips are legal in both North Carolina and Virginia.

News 3 reached out to Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares, who gave a statement regarding fentanyl test strips in the Commonwealth:

“We lose four to five Virginians a day to fentanyl overdoses, and the General Assembly classified the substance as a weapon of terrorism during this year's session. It is a literal poison that is devastating families and threatens our entire country. While I highly discourage any experimentation with recreational drugs, fentanyl strips have undeniably saved precious Virginia lives.”

Seeing positive results

In Dare County, Ruby said he and others are seeing positive results from resources in their community and are thankful for support from North Carolina officials, including Attorney General Josh Stein, in the fight against fentanyl.

“A grandfather was able to provide naloxone to his granddaughter that was in a fentanyl overdose,” Ruby said. “People were able to test their drug supply and find out there was fentanyl in it when that was something they weren't looking for.”

Aside from distributing fentanyl test kits, Dare County health officials also told News 3 they're getting the word out with messaging throughout the county about the dangers of illicit fentanyl, including on billboards.

“We just have to keep on chipping away at it and working at it, having people like Jesse beating down the roads, getting all of these harm reduction tools out there to the community,” Ballinger said.

Ballinger, Ruby, and other health officials said they'll continue working with a harm-reduction approach, hoping to save lives one kit at a time.

“My goal is to have compassion and just walk with them through that, whatever they're going through, with an intent to better lives in mind,” Ruby said.