

The Wilson Times

Town hall meeting to educate public on dangers of fentanyl

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A man holds a poster showing Wilson County residents who have died as a result of fentanyl. Families shared their stories outside the Wilson County Courthouse in September to bring awareness to the dangers of the drug. Fentanyl Victims Network of North Carolina will hold a town hall meeting in Wilson on Feb. 1 at the Foundation YMCA of Wilson. *Drew C. Wilson | Times file photo*

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rs are sounding the alarm on the fentanyl crisis that continues to
 ... the Fentanyl Victims Network of North Carolina will hold a town hall

meeting in Wilson from 2 to 4 p.m., Saturday, Feb. 1, at Foundation YMCA of Wilson at 233 Nash St.

The purpose of the event, organizers say, is to spark public safety conversations about the dangers of illicit fentanyl, particularly when it's found in counterfeit pressed pills like Adderall, Xanax and Percocet.

Organizers will also be distributing naloxone, which goes by the brand name Narcan, and train those attending on how to administer the lifesaving antidote. Local families will also share their heart-wrenching stories of how their loved ones have died from fentanyl poisonings. The event is free and open to the public. No registration is required.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Barb Walsh, founder of Fentanyl Victims Network, has been working with Wilson families who are reeling from the loss of their own children who have died as a result of unintentional fentanyl deaths. The hope, she said, is to bring awareness to a problem that is plaguing the country, the state and Wilson.

“This is a public safety problem we want to address,” Walsh said.

Walsh is holding several town halls throughout the state.

“I chose Wilson because there is a pocket of very active families,” Walsh said. “We have two death by distribution cases going on (in the court system).

Local elected officials, public health professionals, advocates, parents of fentanyl victims, first responders and representatives from the Wilson County Substance Prevention Coalition and the Wilson County district attorney's office will be in attendance at the Feb. 1 town hall meeting. Local law enforcement members have also been invited, organizers said.

“I think it's important for people to see these numbers and realize how many people are dying,” said Lisa Bennett, co-organizer of the event. Bennett lost her son, 22-year-old Mason Bennett, in February 2023. He died after taking what he believed was a Percocet, a prescription painkiller, but it was laced with fentanyl, she has said. Since her son's death, Bennett has been working with Walsh and

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Walsh said 18,457 people in North Carolina have died as a result of fentanyl over a 10-year period.

From 2013 to October 2023, there have been 138 fentanyl deaths in Wilson County alone, according to state data Walsh has compiled.

SOUNDING THE ALARM

Walsh founded the Raleigh-based nonprofit after her daughter, Sophia Walsh, died from fentanyl poisoning in August 2021. Walsh's daughter drank what she thought was a bottled water from someone's refrigerator.

Unbeknownst to her, it contained diluted fentanyl. Sophia died, and no one called 911 until 10 hours later, Walsh said. No one was charged.

"We didn't know what she died from until five months later," Walsh said.

After her daughter's death, Walsh channeled her grief into research, advocacy and justice for other victims. Walsh has worked across the state to bring awareness to the dangers of fentanyl and has worked with families to demand justice in their cases by utilizing state law and getting those responsible charged.

'IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOUR CHILD'

Walsh said there's a misconception about fentanyl deaths. She said not all deaths are the result of someone in active addiction. Some people are simply experimenting.

Seven out of 10 "street" pressed copycat pills contain lethal fentanyl additives, according to officials.

Fentanyl, which is 50 to 100 times more powerful than morphine, is a synthetic opioid that can be lethal even in small doses.

"It could happen to your child," Walsh said. "The pressed pills are the culprit."

Organizers hope to educate families and encourage parents to talk with their children about the dangers that are out there.

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“If we can stop just one family from having to go through this it will be worth it,” Bennett said.

Bennett said more lives will be saved if more people are armed with Narcan.

“They cannot save themselves,” Walsh said. “Someone in the community will have to save them.”

For more information about Fentanyl Victims Network of North Carolina visit www.fentvic.org.