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## Victims' families fight illicit fentanyl in North Carolina, speak during local event

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Forgotten Victims of North Carolina Founder Patricia Drewes shared her experience losing her 24-year-old daughter, Heaven Nelson, to illicit fentanyl poisoning.

Photo by Jillyan Mobley

WATAUGA — The Fentanyl Victims Network of North Carolina and Forgotten Victims of North Carolina hosted an invitation-only event at App Ski Mtn. on Saturday, June 3, to provide victims' loved ones the opportunity to share their story and honor

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children, siblings and parents lost to illicit fentanyl poisoning.

The Fentanyl Victims Network of North Carolina Executive Director Barb Walsh lost her 24 year-old daughter Sophia in 2021 to fentanyl poisoning. Sophia, an App State graduate and successful business woman, was visiting someone in Banner Elk and is thought to have unknowingly consumed a drink laced with illicit fentanyl. While the case closed with no charges pursued, Walsh is committed to bringing awareness to the dangers of fentanyl poisoning and advocate for justice for victims and their families.



Loved ones of illicit fentanyl victims Timothy Daniel Cothron, Alex Bradford, Heaven Nelson, Michiko Duff Marshall Abbott and Brianna Culpepper spoke about their experiences. NC Department of Justice Community Partnership and Outreach Coordinator Holly Jones, NC District 93 Rep. Ray Pickett and Rockingham County Sheriff Sam Page discussed progress and intended actions related to fighting illicit fentanyl.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine.

Pharmaceutical fentanyl is prescribed by doctors to treat severe pain, especially after surgery and for advanced-stage cancer. Most recent cases of fentanyl-related overdose and poisoning are linked to illicitly manufactured fentanyl. It is often added



to other drugs because of its extreme potency, which makes drugs cheaper, more powerful, more addictive and more dangerous, according to the CDC.

Powdered fentanyl looks just like many other drugs and is commonly mixed with drugs like heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine and made into pills that are made to resemble other prescription opioids. Fentanyl-laced drugs are extremely dangerous, and many people may be unaware that their drugs are laced with fentanyl.

In its liquid form, fentanyl can be found in nasal sprays, eye drops and dropped onto paper or small candies.



Memorial photos and poster lined the perimeter of the room at App Ski Mountain.

Photo by Jillyan Mobley

According to the CDC, a substance may contain deadly levels of fentanyl and would not be detectable by sight, smell or taste. Testing strips are the only way to ensure a substance does not contain fentanyl.

At the event, the hosting organizations stated 13,376 North Carolinians lost their lives to illicit fentanyl in the past nine years and eight NC residents a day die from fentanyl poisoning.

According to a report by the CDC in 2021, fentanyl poisoning was the leading cause of death among Americans ages 18 to 45. The same report found that fentanyl fatalities among children zero to 14 years old are rising faster than any other group at an increase of 1,400% from 2015 to 2021.

Forty-seven percent of medication and drug toxicity deaths involved fentanyl from 2013 to 2022 in Watauga County, according to the NC State Center for Health Statistics.

According to the CDC, signs of fentanyl poisoning often cause the same symptoms of opioid overdose including:

- Small, constricted “pinpoint pupils,”
- Falling asleep or losing consciousness;
- Slow, weak, or no breathing;
- Choking or gurgling sounds;
- Limp body;
- Cold and/or clammy skin; and
- Discolored skin, especially in lips and nails.

If witnessing these symptoms, the CDC recommends calling 911 immediately, administering naloxone if available, trying to keep the person awake, laying the person on their side to prevent choking and staying with them until emergency services arrive.

The NC 911 Good Samaritan Law states that individuals who experience or persons who witness medical emergencies as a result of drugs and seek help for the victim can no longer be prosecuted for possession of small amounts of drugs, paraphernalia or underage drinking.

Naloxone is a life-saving medication that can reverse the effects of opioid overdose and fentanyl poisoning.

While some individuals are poisoned with fentanyl while not using other substances, the majority of fentanyl deaths can be linked to the lacing of other illicit substances. According to the CDC, the stigma faced by those with substance use disorder impacts how fentanyl poisoning deaths are managed.

For more information, visit [www.forgottenvictimsofnc.org/](http://www.forgottenvictimsofnc.org/) and [fvnnc.org](http://fvnnc.org).

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