

Four hours in Huntington: How the heroin epidemic choked a city

DRUG ABUSE

By Claire Galofaro

Of The Associated Press

HUNTINGTON, W.VA. >> He found the woman slumped over the steering wheel, an empty syringe on the floorboard and her skin dulling to a purplish blue.

Dave McClure, an EMS supervisor, counted four faint breaths per minute. Without the antidote he carried, she'd be dead in five minutes.

It was 3:25 p.m. on what was, so far, an ordinary Monday. For an EMT in this struggling city, bringing an addict back from the brink of opiate-fueled death counts as routine.

But as McClure searched for an unscarred vein in the young woman's arm, dozens of others were shooting or snorting the same toxic powder she'd just taken. They started dropping, their muscles seizing, pupils shrinking to the size of pinheads. The heroin epidemic that had been quietly killing by the thousands began boiling to a climax that would traumatize the city and exhaust its emergency responders.

McClure's radio squawked as he pushed in the IV full of a liquid called naloxone, which blocks the effects of opioids and jolts those overdosing back to life. "We've got another overdose," the dispatcher reported. "We've got two more."

The woman's eyes blinked open.

Red lights on the phone at the 911 dispatch center flashed faster and faster until all 16 lines were screaming. They called from the dining room of a rickety house, the parking lot of a fast food restaurant, the bathroom of a gas station.

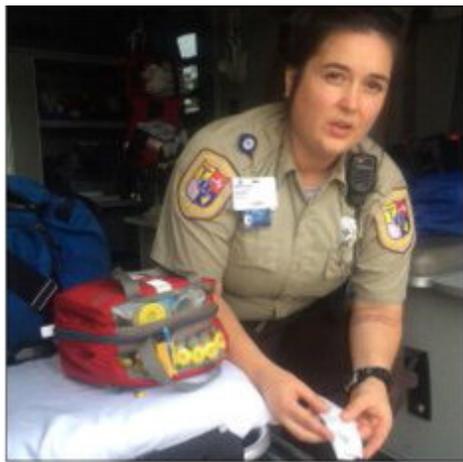
"People are dying everywhere," one caller said.

In the next four hours of Aug. 15, 28 people overdosed in Huntington; 26 of them were saved. One man died at the hospital that night, and another was found dead and alone days later.

Ambulances darted around town as cars pulled up at the hospital, dropped overdosing people at the emergency room doors and sped away. The drugs were so potent that the ordinary dose of naloxone wasn't enough; responders had to use two, sometimes three doses to bring them back to life.

"It was chaos here," says Yohlinda Dixon, a 55-yearold who lives in the neighborhood where dozens overdosed. "They were all dropping the same time, like boom boom boom boom boom. That's what was so scary. You knew they were fixing to die. And that's the last thing you want to see, someone die right in front of you."

was a good day, by comparison.



In this Aug. 28 photo, Cabell County EMT Tabitha Perez demonstrates how medics administer naloxone to overdosing patients, in Huntington, W. Va. On Aug. 15, 28 people overdosed in Huntington and 26 survived. Without the life-saving drug, authorities suspect the death toll would have been much higher. The laced heroin was so potent, the typical dose failed to revive many of them. They used two, sometimes three doses to bring them back to life.

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