

CHESTERFIELD Observer

VOLUME 24, NUMBER 39 | YOUR COUNTY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1995 | CHESTERFIELDOBSERVER.COM | SEPTEMBER 25, 2019

Democrats cry foul on proffer cut

County says policy change has spurred revitalization

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Three years after the Republican-controlled Board of Supervisors overhauled Chesterfield's cash proffer policy, local Democrats are seizing on the issue in the runoff to the Nov. 5 election.

The Chesterfield County Democratic Committee claimed in a press release last week that the board's action has resulted in the loss of \$119 million in proffer revenue from 43 zoning cases. Cash proffers are per-unit fees paid by developers to address the impact of new residential projects on public infrastructure.

"Residents here are already struggling with overcrowded schools, main roadways that look like parking lots, and too few facilities. While we welcome newcomers to the county, wealthy developers who profit immensely off new homes need to help shoulder the burden for this additional

See **PROFFERS** on page 15

SHARING SPACE:

FOR TELECOMMUTERS, TEMPORARY OFFICES FILL A GROWING VOID Page 7



AGAINST THE CLOCK

He's ruffled feathers in a race to implement sweeping changes in the commonwealth's attorney's office. But can Scott Miles make his reforms stick?

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

The courts are peaceful now. Aside from the occasional office staffer or sheriff's deputy, light dockets on a recent Wednesday afternoon have left the hallways mostly empty as Scott Miles, Chesterfield's commonwealth's attorney, makes his way through the county courthouse.

For Miles, it's a rare break from his typically packed schedule. Since taking office last November, Miles has kept himself busy, making the rounds of community events in a way that his longtime predecessor, Billy Davenport, didn't. He's also transformed the culture of his office, deemphasizing the prosecution of minor offenses, such as marijuana charges, and reducing cash bail requests, among other initiatives.

But the changes haven't come without resistance. As much as Miles' criminal justice reform efforts are in line with his campaign promises, he's been criticized publicly for overstepping and a failure to communicate, putting him crossways with the county sheriff and the police chief. His opponent in the November election, Stacey Davenport – a Republican currently serving as an assistant commonwealth's attorney in Henrico – is vowing to return the office to a more traditional role, by beefing up enforcement and rolling back Miles' efforts to reduce prosecution of lesser offenses.

For Miles, the clock is ticking. He's had less than a year to

implement sweeping changes, and in an off-off-year election – meaning no statewide or national candidates will be on the ballot – a lower turnout at the polls could dampen the Democratic enthusiasm that helped usher him into office a year ago.

With all 140 seats of the General Assembly and nearly all of Chesterfield's elected offices on the ballot this fall, Chesterfield's commonwealth's attorney's race stands out. It's one of the few countywide contests, and the result could have a long-lasting impact on the local criminal justice system.

Miles knows this fall will be a referendum on his policies and progress, and says having less than a year to implement his changes has given him a sense of urgency.

"There are things that I promised to do once I got into office, and I knew I had some months to make progress and then report back before this next election," he says. "We've been kind of at it from day one."

Having previously served as an Army officer, legal aid attorney, a public defender and prosecutor, Miles began getting involved in local politics because of his work as a criminal defense attorney in Chesterfield.

"I saw the need. I moved to Chesterfield and started attending

See **COMMONWEALTH'S ATTORNEY** on page 4



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COMMONWEALTH'S ATTORNEY
from page 1

political meetings," Miles says, adding that at Chesterfield County Democratic Committee meetings, he met other lawyers who would "gripe about how things worked in Chesterfield County."

Shortly after Billy Davenport announced that he was stepping down, Miles decided he would run.

In the special election, Miles narrowly beat Republican John Childrey, a former chief deputy commonwealth's attorney, by 1.8 percentage points. Since then, he's been working to implement sweeping changes to how his office operates.

One change concerns the treatment of low-level, nonviolent misdemeanors, which he says was previously "overly aggressive." Prosecutions of simple marijuana charges, driving with a suspended license and first-time shoplifting offenses, for example, are now being dialed back in favor of an emphasis on rehabilitation. Likewise, the office is pursuing fewer felony convictions for bigger drug possession charges and overdoses, facilitating recovery instead.

Another change concerns how the county handles cash bail requests. The new policy opposes any bail for dangerous defendants while agreeing to unsecured bail – meaning no money has to be offered up front – for defendants who pose no apparent threat.

"People [who] didn't have liquid funds were getting worse results in court and worse treatment while their cases were pending," Miles says. "I issued a flurry of policies to address those."

Another change is the creation of the Chesterfield Recovery Initiative, a new program that provides recovery assistance instead of convictions to individuals charged with certain drug-related offenses. Miles says the initiative has been the most controversial "but probably most important" change to his office, and that the longstanding drug court program – which has similar aims – only handles a small percentage of cases. He says CRI is intended to complement drug court.

In CRI, people with drug charges go through an intake assessment with one of the program's recovery partners (such as the McShin Foundation and Chesterfield's Department of Mental Health Support Services), then develop a personalized plan, including classes and groups related to substance abuse. The person will be randomly drug tested, and after at least five months of sustained effort and progress in recovery, the commonwealth's attorney's office will forgo prosecution of felony charges. Six people are currently enrolled.

"Traditionally, our [office] was to obtain the felony conviction in almost every case," Miles says. "If it wasn't [a defendant's] first time through, we would pair it with active jail time in successively



"I was elected to do this thing, and I perceived pretty early that the chief wasn't going to support this thing. Did I go to the chief to ask his permission? No."

ASH DANIEL

longer amounts. It seems inhumane and unfair and unjust, because really we're taking someone who may have maintained a job, may be a competent parent, is part of a community, and we're knocking that over [with jail time]."

Not all of these changes have been received well by law enforcement officials. Col. Jeffrey Katz, the county's police chief, says even though he agrees with "thoughtful" criminal justice reforms, Miles made these changes unilaterally.

"Regretfully, despite having similar desires to innovate, no ... partnership exists between the police department and Mr. Miles' Commonwealth Attorney's Office," says Katz via email. "It's not for a lack of communication or regular meetings – it's a lack of information sharing and, most recently, a lack of trust. Mr. Miles came into office with an ideological template for reforming criminal justice in Chesterfield County without so much as asking a single question to those responsible for providing these services. He made no inquiry whatsoever – at least of the police department – with respect to what's working, what's not, what we can improve upon, how we might be able to innovate, etc."

"Mr. Miles doesn't own the patent on criminal justice reform and it is disingenuous for him to suggest that he's the only person in Chesterfield County looking out for those who are down on their luck, making poor choices, or struggling with addiction. My officers, sheriff's deputies, and officers of the court do this every day whether he wishes to acknowledge this or not."

In response, Miles says his ideas sprang from meeting with community members, and that as an elected official, he has a mandate from the public to pursue these reforms. He criticizes Katz for "pearl clutching" at his initiatives "while claiming to be apolitical."

"I was elected to do this thing, and I perceived pretty early that the chief wasn't going to support this thing," Miles says. "Did I go to the chief to ask his permission? No."

Instead, Miles says he met with different recovery agencies and county departments, and explained his plans to the county's Opioid Steering Committee, among other groups.

Sheriff Karl Leonard says that while he agrees with many of the changes and has collaborated with Miles in other ways, the rollout of CRI rankled him, especially when someone from the program entered the county jail to recruit inmates.

"I was completely out of the loop on [this], and I don't know why it's different from other things we've collaborated on," says Leonard, who operates his own recovery program at the jail called Helping Addicts Recover Permanently, or HARP. "I would have appreciated [knowing] that someone was actually going in my jail and doing this kind of recruiting."

That said, he supports efforts to help those with addiction, and agrees with Miles' policy changes regarding cash bail and lower-level marijuana possession.

"I don't need someone sitting in my jail for three months because they had a marijuana roach in their possession," Leonard says. "I think there's other crimes we need to be addressing that the space in our jail could be better suited for."

Kevin Carroll, a former county police officer and current president of the Chesterfield Fraternal Order of Police who is running for the Matoaca seat on the Board of Supervisors, says Miles' changes are out of line for him to make.

"The General Assembly makes laws for us all to follow, and what we find when some candidates get elected [is] they try to circumvent what the law actually is," Carroll says. "Some of the statements

that he makes, some of the things that he thinks and feels, I just don't agree with it."

But just how outside the norm are Miles' changes?

Christina Mancini, an associate professor of criminal justice at Virginia Commonwealth University's L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, says this is a question that has been playing out across America as some begin to question longstanding law enforcement practices.

"It's not out of step with what's happening nationally," Mancini says.

In Virginia, Richmond, Charlottesville, Arlington and Alexandria have also stopped asking judges to set cash bail for some defendants awaiting trial. In May, the Virginia Supreme Court rejected the efforts of Norfolk's commonwealth's attorney to essentially decriminalize marijuana in the city by dismissing misdemeanor arrests for the drug. At the same time, marijuana arrests reached their highest level in Virginia in at least 20 years in 2018. Last year's nearly 29,000 arrests in the state have led to increased calls for legalization, including from Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring.

Not only are some localities rethinking policies on cash bail and minor marijuana offenses, but there's been bipartisan work at the federal level for criminal justice reform. Mancini points to the First Step Act, which seeks to reduce recidivism and was signed into law by President Donald Trump in 2018, as one example.

Still, Mancini says not having local law enforcement officials on one's side can put the prosecutor's office in a sticky situation.

"Ideally, you want criminal justice to function as one big happy family," she says, adding that it could be discouraging for arresting officers to see offenders released without prosecution. "How frustrating is this, that you arrest someone who is breaking a law and you see that person the very next day on the street with seemingly no accountability?"

When Miles ran for office last year, Carroll and others criticized his campaign promise to reduce cash bail, saying that letting people out without paying for bail would increase crime and see fewer people show up for court. Miles contends that the opposite has happened, and that the "public safety rate" – the rate at which supervised defendants avoid new criminal charges while pending trial – has actually increased from 96% to 98%.

Mancini says the research on defendants who are released without posting a cash bail agrees with Miles. According to researchers, defendants who don't spend time in jail awaiting bail can return to work and the stability of their normal lives more quickly, which makes them more likely to show up for court dates.

"They don't tend to abscond," says Mancini of the defendants. "One study in

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Manhattan found that they came to court at higher rates than individuals who were not a part of that system.”

Randy Rowlett, a local defense attorney with the firm Gordon, Dodson, Gordon & Rowlett, says Miles’ changes have been well received at the courthouse.

“The defense attorneys collectively applaud his efforts,” he says. “Most of us are aware that [criminal justice reform is] a wave that’s coming across the country.”

Rowlett says he hasn’t seen any opposition from law enforcement officers to the changes in court, and says judges have occasionally questioned the changes to better understand them. Shifts in courthouse culture, he says, are nothing new. In the early 1990s, when he was a prosecutor, Rowlett says plea agreements weren’t looked upon favorably by circuit court judges. Around 2000, judges became more accepting of them.

Noting that a new commonwealth’s attorney would usually have four years to implement changes, Rowlett says he understands the complications of Miles’ role.

“He’s in a difficult position because of the one-year turnaround,” he says. “If you change too quickly, you make a lot of waves.”

Challenging Miles this fall is Stacey Davenport, an experienced attorney with a platform of her own. A native of Nashville, Davenport has served as a prosecutor in Essex and Henrico counties, was a public defender in Richmond and previously owned her own law firm.

Running on proposals of increased enforcement for domestic abuse, human trafficking and violent crime, Davenport disagrees with Miles’ initiatives. She says she would discontinue Miles’ recovery program, and that she opposes how Miles has changed the way the office prosecutes certain crimes, saying it is the work of the “progressive left,” and that changes in law should come from the General Assembly.

“My position on marijuana is you can’t just across the board decide that you’re not going to prosecute it,” Davenport says. “I feel like if you’re just continuing to ignore it or give people a slap on the wrist over and over and over again, you’re ignoring a problem. The constant use of marijuana is a problem and does lead to other drugs.”

She says existing efforts in this vein – such as Virginia’s first-offender program, which allows first-time drug offenders to be placed on probation while undergoing assessment and drug addiction treatment and have their charges dismissed – are already on the books.

Davenport also criticizes Miles for not prosecuting a student accused of causing an active shooter scare at Manchester High School in May. In the case, a student falsely reported to school administration that there was a gun on campus, causing a school lockdown. Though county police requested charging documents against the student, Davenport says Miles

declined to prosecute.

“Scott Miles ignored his duty to represent the victims of this crime,” said Davenport in a Sept. 21 statement. “Miles only cares about advancing a political agenda. Our students, teachers, administrators and all citizens of Chesterfield deserve better.”

In an email to the Observer, Miles responded by saying, “Our review of the evidence in this case led us to the unanimous conclusion that the accused juvenile is either entirely innocent or not demonstrably guilty,” and said Davenport was “attempting to use this child as a campaign prop.”

As for her own platform, Davenport says she wants to work with the Police Department to establish “evidence-based prosecution” in domestic violence cases, allowing cases to move forward without requiring victim testimony. She wants to create a regional human trafficking task force, and wants to target drug distributors and violent offenders.

“I am running because I believe I am the person best suited to keeping Chesterfield safe and enforcing equitable justice,” she says.

Who will win in the race between Miles and Davenport is anyone’s guess. Bob Holsworth, a longtime political analyst in Richmond, says Miles’ victory in “a relatively conservative county” last fall startled some. Unlike last year, where the high-profile fight between

then-Republican Congressman Dave Brat and Democratic challenger Abigail Spanberger brought people to the polls, Holsworth says it will be interesting to see what kind of support Miles generates in November.

“His victory, I think, surprised a lot of people,” says Holsworth. “It probably was related in part to how well Spanberger was doing and the like, but my sense was that it was a surprising election, and if he turns out to win again, it will have turned out to be a landmark election. This election is about whether he can consolidate that victory, and he has to do so now with some very vocal opposition.”

Though the past two years have seen an increase in Democratic voter turnout since Trump’s election, no one is sure whether the momentum will continue.

“That turns out to be the big question of all the elections, not only in Chesterfield, but in Virginia,” Holsworth says. “Historically, in the off-off years, Republicans have done quite well, and so the question is, can the Democrats generate a turnout that will resemble 2017 and ’18 more than 2013.”

Asked what he thinks of his reelection chances, Miles says politics aren’t his area of expertise, but he believes his efforts have been representative of the public’s will.

“If I’ve erred, it’s been on the side of making something happen,” he says, “rather than making people comfortable.” ■



Stacey Davenport

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• HENRICO •

Tuckahoe Library

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HEAVY METAL

Fire and emergency crews tackle the unexpected in training competition: extricating the 'Jackass'

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

The scenery and scenarios may change, but the green, irregularly shaped logging counterweight dubbed the "Jackass" remains a constant of Virginia's annual Rescue Challenge.

Over the years, the 2,400-pound hunk of metal has been utilized in a variety of situations designed to flex the problem-solving skills of rescue teams from around the country. It's been buried and excavated from the sand in Virginia Beach. It's been pulled out of trenches and schlepped over creeks on a series of improvised bridges.

See **RESCUE CHALLENGE** on page 15

ASH DANIEL

Rescue personnel from Central Virginia work to move a logging counterweight dubbed the "Jackass" over an I-beam as part of the 2019 Rescue Challenge's obstacle course. The green 2,400-pound weight has become a staple of the event.

County strikes agreement to replace aging billboards

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Seeking to thin out Chesterfield's herd of aging, dilapidated billboards and significantly improve the appearance of those left standing, local officials concluded they couldn't do much without the cooperation of the county's dominant outdoor advertising entity.

That's because the 91 billboards erected prior to the passage of Chesterfield's 1992 sign ordinance are protected by state law and the county has no authority to unilaterally remove them.

See **BILLBOARDS** on page 5

INSIDE:
2019 GUIDE TO
CHESTERFIELD
COUNTY



Chesterfield sees spike in homicides

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

With its abundant greenery, tall oak trees and simple rancher and Cape Cod-style homes, the neighborhood of Forest Acres is the type of place best seen in the height of spring.

Banded geographically by the Powhite Parkway and Courthouse and Reams roads, this community is usually a quiet one, with street names like Darylann Court and Vickilee Road projecting a sense of southern familiarity.

But the neighborhood received a jolt on May 7 when it became the setting of a late-night shooting in the 10200 block of Ronaldton Road. According to police, 23-year-old Tavarion E. Gates and three associates were conspiring to shoot a known individual in a vehicle parked on Ronaldton Road when

See **HOMICIDES** on page 4



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RESCUE CHALLENGE from page 1

And last week, at RJ Smith Materials' industrial facility in Chester, the Jackass was trapped under a large, metal, cage-like structure as part of the 2019 Rescue Challenge's obstacle course.

"It's a very frustrating thing to work with, and it requires that you be careful," said Capt. Amy Burnette, program manager for Chesterfield Fire and EMS' Technical Rescue Team, standing next to the Rescue Challenge's obstacle course last week.

Though the Jackass is said to have gotten its name because its shape vaguely resembles the head of a donkey, it may just as well have received it for its unwieldy and stubborn nature. Looking a little like a crude oversized bathtub, in its previous life it would have added weight to a vehicle to increase its lift capacity in logging operations. Here, its size and heft require rescuers to have a strong understanding of physics and how to properly use their tools in order to remove it from its cage and navigate it through a series of obstacles.

Such know-how is essential in real-life rescues, which can involve extricating someone trapped under heavy machinery or a downed tree, for instance.

Dealing with the Jackass was just one of eight scenarios that roughly 200 rescue personnel from across the state – as well as from Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland – encountered as part of the annual challenge. Since 1995, various localities around Virginia have hosted the event as a way to practice advanced technical rescue techniques.

While rescue crews are already well-versed in the skills they need on the job, these exercises allow them to practice using their equipment while they troubleshoot problems in real time without having to worry about life-and-death consequences. Dealing with emergency situations like extracting someone from a vehicular crash, structural collapse or a confined space are just a few of the circumstances practiced as part of the challenge.

"We're not teaching here as much as having them perform at a high level," Burnette said. "Here is where you get presented complex scenarios."

As emergency situations sometimes take place in hard to reach locations, participants are only allowed the use of simple machines, such as pry bars, winches and A-frames in order to replicate the field conditions they might find themselves in.

"It gives them hands-on experience they might not see every day," said Hanover Battalion Chief Gregory Martin. Because lives aren't at risk, Martin says the exercises allow rescue personnel the ability to try new procedures. "They can do some things they wouldn't normally do in an emergency situation. It allows them to



ASH DANIEL

A rescue team from Hampton Roads works to extricate dummies from a car that has been crushed under concrete slabs and the cab of an 18-wheeler. Exercises like these help rescue personnel train for real-life scenarios.

push the boundaries of what they might usually do."

In order to share the logistical burden of planning the event and to spawn a variety of different rescue situations – such as cave or water rescues – the location of the Rescue Challenge changes every two years; Central Virginia will host again next year.

For the event, rescue teams from different jurisdictions partner together; Chesterfield participated as part of the Central Virginia team alongside rescue personnel from Richmond, Henrico, Hanover, and Tri-Cities localities including Colonial Heights, Petersburg, Hopewell and Fort Lee.

According to Martin, this partnering is similar to real life, where crews from different localities might join forces at the site of an emergency.

"The kinds of incidents that they're practicing for here, while low frequency, are high impact and high risk for our personnel, and for the citizens involved," said Chesterfield Fire and EMS Battalion Chief Tim McKay. "It's just invaluable."

As for the Jackass, the Central Virginia team made quick work of it. After extricating it from the cage, teams had to carry the Jackass over and under a series of steel I-beams, through a boulder-filled concrete passageway called "The Tunnel of Love" and hoist it atop a series of wooden platforms.

Lt. Bradley Morefield of Chesterfield Fire

and EMS was one of the team members who helped clear the way through the Tunnel of Love.

"They really develop excellent scenarios for everyone to work through. Seeing the team come together and exercise those skills, it's validation of our training," said Morefield of the Rescue Challenge. "It really helps us prepare for an actual event."

To complete the obstacle course, the challenge's architects set out a benchmark of 3 hours for completion; the Central Virginia team completed it quicker than the others, clocking in around 2 hours.

While the scenarios are timed, Burnette stressed that the Rescue Challenge is more about learning how to work together than it is about competition.

"It's not a race, but there is some pride in getting [it done] safely and quickly," she said. ■

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CHESTERFIELD Observer

VOLUME 24, NUMBER 45 | YOUR COUNTY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1995 | CHESTERFIELDOBSERVER.COM | NOVEMBER 6, 2019



With another project on the way, some worry solar facilities will consume too much land

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

How much solar is enough for Chesterfield County? And how much would be too much? Those questions were raised at a recent Board of Supervisors meeting, when the board unanimously approved the rezoning of a 329-acre property in the rural Winterpock area for use as a solar farm.

California-based Cypress Creek Renewables plans to lease the property and expects to have a 20-megawatt solar facility operating there by the first quarter of 2022.

It's the second such project approved by the Board of Supervisors in the past two months. Torch Clean Energy, a renewable energy company headquartered in Colorado, received a conditional-use permit in September to develop 1,675 acres in south Chester for a hybrid solar farm and data center.

Additional solar farms likely will be coming to Chesterfield in future years, drawn here by availability

of undeveloped land, access to Dominion Energy's transmission network and significant tax incentives that are part of the state's long-term plan to eliminate use of coal-fired power plants.

State and local economic development officials also see solar facilities as critical to attract job-creating companies, which increasingly are demanding access to clean, renewable energy in their expansion and relocation plans.

"Most major industries in the country are now expecting to have clean energy. Virginia, sadly, has lagged behind," said Chesterfield resident Glen Besa, a longtime environmental advocate who spoke at the Board of Supervisors' Oct. 23 meeting. "This is one step in getting to where we need to be."

With solar projects on the horizon, the Board of

See **SOLAR FARM** on page 18

Narcan use rises as police see leveling of opioid deaths

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

Since Chesterfield police began tracking opioid overdoses in 2014, they've seen an increase every year in the number of fatal overdoses in the county, with the biggest leap occurring between 2015 and 2016, when that figure more than doubled from 18 to 37.

Now, though, police say they may be seeing a leveling-off of fatal heroin- and opioid-related overdoses. One possible reason? The widespread availability of Narcan, a form of the drug naloxone that can save

See **NARCAN** on page 19

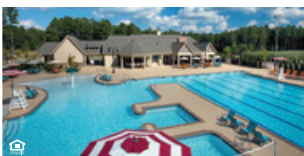


Midlothian boy to compete on 'Chopped Junior'

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Two days before Halloween, a smiling Jake Nelson greets two visitors to his family's Midlothian home in a chef's trademark white, 3/4-sleeve cotton jacket. It's no costume. The Robious Middle School sixth-grader has been busy in the kitchen,

See **CHOPPED JUNIOR** on page 6



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NARCAN from page 1



PHOTOS BY ASH DANIEL
Chesterfield Police Capt. John Miller, commander of the special investigations division, says officers have so far this year administered 63 doses of Narcan, left, which reverses the effects of an opioid overdose.

people's lives during an overdose, which Chesterfield police began carrying 18 months ago.

From Jan. 1 through Nov. 2, the Chesterfield County Police Department has responded to 34 fatal overdoses, the same number they responded to during the same timeframe last year. Chesterfield has also experienced a 4.5% dip in nonfatal overdoses, down from 177 by Nov. 2, 2018, to 169 by that time this year.

These figures come as fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid that can be as much as 50 times stronger than heroin and is cheaper to produce and distribute, has caused an increase in fatalities in many localities.

Capt. John Miller, commander of the Chesterfield County Police Department's special investigations division, says the local leveling off and decline may be attributed to a variety of reasons. First, he says doctors have become more stringent in prescribing opioids to patients, which is how many users first become addicted. Also, recovery endeavors such as the county jail's Helping Addicts Recover Permanently program, have assisted those dealing with addiction.

Regarding fatal overdoses, Miller says Narcan has become more readily available, with county police carrying the medication since May 2018. Comparing 2017 to 2018, the department tracked its smallest year-over-year increase in fatal opioid overdoses: from 43 to 46.

"Things are better now, as far as our response," says Miller, adding that as Virginia allows people to purchase Narcan at pharmacies without a prescription, the drug is now more prevalent in society. "It's a good thing that people are using it, and part of the reason it's becoming more available is we're pushing it into the community. . . . Family members view that as a tool to save their loved ones."

When Narcan is used, it usually means a person is unconscious and unresponsive; were it not for the drug, Miller says many of these victims would likely die. So far this year, county police have administered 63 doses of Narcan, compared to 45 doses administered from May through December of last year. Chesterfield Fire & EMS also keep figures on the drug; last year, they administered 460 individual doses of naloxone to 360 individuals. As of Nov. 1 of this year, the department has administered 380 doses to 303 patients.

"I see each one of those Narcan uses as a potentially averted death," Miller says.

All this comes as fentanyl has made using heroin an even riskier proposition. Because it's cheaper and easier to distribute, dealers are increasingly cutting their heroin with fentanyl to make more money and make their drugs more potent.

Unlike heroin, which is made after harvesting morphine from opium poppy plants and then refined into a powder, fentanyl can either be purchased from China or manufactured in clandestine laboratories with precursor chemicals, creating more product with less labor than heroin. In East Coast cities with longstanding communities of heroin addicts, like Baltimore, the proliferation of fentanyl led to a

surge in overdose deaths.

"It's pretty common nowadays to find heroin laced with fentanyl, because it's a cutting agent that dealers can get their hands on," Miller says. "The deal with fentanyl is it's kind of prolific, and the Trump administration this year, they supposedly came to an agreement with China not to export it, because apparently we were bringing in a lot of fentanyl through the mail."

He's referring to China's decision, effective May 1 of this year, to treat all fentanyl-related products as controlled substances (previously more than two dozen variants of fentanyl were regulated, but manufacturers could alter the drug slightly to circumvent the law). The move followed months of lobbying by President Donald Trump's administration to crack down on exports of such drugs to the United States.

Whether the ban has been successful has been a source of debate between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping. When police busted a multi-state drug ring in Virginia this summer, the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia announced that one of the 39 people charged had purchased fentanyl from China and had it mailed to Newport News.

Miller says law enforcement can usually tell when a batch of heroin containing a higher level of fentanyl hits the streets, because there's an increase in overdoses and deaths. As an example, Miller cites a 24-hour period early this May in which county police responded to six suspected overdose calls; there were a total of three heroin- or opioid-related deaths over the May 4 weekend.

Because buyers don't always know when the drug they're using contains fentanyl, or in what quantity, some addicts are turning to methamphetamine and other drugs, which they regard as being less risky.

"It sounds not logical, but addicts believe if they use methamphetamines, it's a safer alternative," says Miller, adding that meth use and meth-related arrests have recently increased in Appalachia, one of the regions hardest hit by the nation's opioid crisis. "The trend seems to be that the next stage could potentially be meth. We anticipate that it could see its way in the Richmond area."

Sheriff Karl Leonard, who oversees the Chesterfield County Jail and created its HARP program, says that while he still sees a large number of people addicted to heroin and opioids admitted to his jail, recently there's been a spike in those addicted to both heroin and an additional drug, such as meth or cocaine.

"We're really making an impact on educating people on the dangers of heroin, especially with the fentanyl in the area, and I think people, believe it or not, [are making] a conscious decision to stay away from heroin, but then they

go to meth instead," Leonard says. "We're seeing that transition. It's still not what we want. What we want [is for] people to stop using all illegal drugs and get people into recovery."

Leonard agrees that Narcan has had a beneficial effect in the county, but stresses that opioid deaths are still happening and that heroin addiction is still very much a problem in Chesterfield.

"I do think that is due to the large amounts of Narcan that have made it into our community," he says. "I truly believe that is saving lives in our community, so the education part that the county has done countywide, I think that is really paying off, but it's still a crisis. It's still claiming lives."

John Shinholser, president of the Richmond-based peer-to-peer recovery organization the McShin Foundation, says what he's seeing aligns with what's happening in Chesterfield.

"We've definitely got an uptick in meth. Meth is coming on strong; crack is back," says Shinholser. "Heroin hasn't really gone away [either]."

Capt. J.D. Hoyt of the Henrico County Police Division's Drug Enforcement Unit says they've seen a slight decrease in fatal heroin and opioid overdoses compared to last year and a slight increase in nonfatal overdoses. He attributes the decline in deaths to Narcan, which Henrico police started carrying last month.

For all fatal overdoses – including cocaine, alcohol and benzodiazepines – Hoyt says Henrico has seen a 16% increase over the same timeframe last year. As in Chesterfield, he says some heroin addicts are moving to other drugs in Henrico.

"A lot of them are switching from heroin to cocaine, some methamphetamine," Hoyt says. "The problem is drug dealers are cutting their cocaine now [too]; they're throwing fentanyl on top of it to increase its potency."

Though he sees the decline and leveling off in Chesterfield as good news, Miller says the county is still dealing with the effects of the opioid crisis.

"Heroin is the biggest thing. We still have heroin overdoses every week, it seems like," he says. "We still get reports of folks using it. It's probably the most prevalent drug narcotic that we have come across that people are overdosing on. It's better, but it's still a problem." ■



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