



# INSIDENOVA

## PRINCE WILLIAM



\$1 JULY 1-7, 2021

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# Bracing for Impact

## Child protective agencies fear increase in cases

» BY JARED FORETEK  
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Detecting child abuse often requires a keen sense from a trained adult. A child might subtly hint at something to a teacher, or a pediatrician might notice visible signs of neglect or abuse during a check-up. Sometimes, a family friend overhears something troubling.

But as with so many parts of life in the spring and summer of 2020, those signs of child abuse were often hidden from public view.

Now, social services departments across the Prince William region are staffing up to keep pace with a surge in child protective service (CPS) calls. After an

initial drop in reports at the start of the pandemic, numbers have climbed back to pre-COVID levels in some places and surpassed them in others.

Across the state, educators are the biggest source of CPS calls, and when schools closed and other public settings shuttered at the start of the pandemic, calls dropped precipitously. In Prince William County, February 2020 saw 465 CPS calls, followed by 361 in March and then just 192 in April, the lowest number of the year. At the end of the year, calls began to pick back up and by March of this year they had reached 400 again.

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### ONE FINAL BLAST



Hundreds of people gathered at Tim's Rivershore Restaurant and Crabhouse near Dumfries on Saturday evening for the venue's final "Not on the Fourth" celebration, with fireworks launched from a barge on the Potomac River. After 28 years, the popular eatery on the river is closing at the end of September under terms of an agreement between its owner and the landlord, which also manages the adjacent Potomac Shores development.

PHOTOS BY PAUL LARA | INSIDENOVA



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In Manassas Park, which didn't provide monthly numbers, Social Services Director Randi Knights told InsideNoVa that call volumes are actually higher than they were before the pandemic. "Being at an agency for 15 years, [we're] seeing that we definitely have more calls and more cases than I've seen."

As a result, the city added funding for an in-home CPS specialist to its budget for fiscal year 2022, which begins July 1.

Social services staff in Manassas, where most high schoolers remained virtual for the entire school year and the bulk of younger students weren't allowed back into schools until the end of the spring semester, say that they haven't seen calls return to pre-pandemic levels. But workers are preparing for more.

"We know that the calls went down during the pandemic because the kids weren't visible and they weren't in school," said Michele Gehr, the city's director of social services. "But once they get back in school, does that look like a lot more CPS reports?"

### ADULT CALLS INCREASE

Meanwhile, Manassas is battling a different problem. At the same time CPS calls went down, adult protective service calls went up. In its fiscal year 2022 budget, Manassas funded three new full-time social services positions, including what's now being considered a hybrid child and adult protective services position that would be added to the four case workers the department has for both populations.

Prince William County staff noted that not all CPS calls turn out to be valid reports of abuse. In Virginia, most reports result in "family assessments," which the state defines as "an alternative response which includes engaging with the family to assess the strengths and needs of the children and families."

During the year that ended June 30, 2020, 33,380 CPS reports were completed statewide, with 23,826 resulting in family

assessments, 6,265 declared unfounded and 3,789 declared founded. Of the founded reports, the majority stemmed from physical neglect. Just over a quarter were from physical abuse, and in about 10% of the cases, maltreatment was due to sexual abuse.

The county's Department of Social Services is undertaking two big projects aimed at child welfare and CPS investigations. In December last year, the department built a new six-person CPS unit working exclusively at night. Phyllis Jennings-Holt, the county's assistant director of protective services, said about 25% of CPS calls come in between 5 p.m. and 8 a.m., and investigators are expected to complete their investigation in 45 to 60 days.

### 'EMERGENCY DUTY IS JUST HELL'

Previously, CPS investigators had to be ready to go out on a call at all different times of the day and night. If the police were investigating an allegation of child abuse, a CPS investigator had to be in tow, regardless of whether that staffer had worked the previous day or would be needed in court the next morning. With the new night team, case workers will no longer need to rotate being on call for emergency service.

"It's not just the percentage, it is the complexity of the call. And the complexity of the call is really what can wear you out because it just doesn't stop then. You still have to go through the process of the investigation ... on top of the other cases you have," Jennings-Holt told InsideNoVa.

With hours and paperwork piling up for some, the week-long emergency duty shifts were making an already emotionally taxing job just as physically demanding. Jennings-Holt estimates that the average CPS worker typically stays on the job from about 18 months to two years.

"That lends itself to burnout, that lends itself to a problem with staff retention, that lends itself to quality of work," she added. "So after looking at our retention rate and talking with staff, looking at the data ... when you do an exit interview, which HR will do, they'll say, 'Hey, I love Prince William, it's a great place to work ... but you know, emergency duty is just hell, it's hell.'"

### COUNTY FUNDS NEW CENTER

By the end of this year, the county is also planning a dedicated space for child protective services. Prince William's budget funds a new "Child Advocacy Center" inside the Ferlazzo government building in Woodbridge. Staffing the center will be two therapists and two forensic investigators, as well as administrative workers to help with case management.

When a CPS call is received, a screener first evaluates whether the incident is a "valid complaint." If it is, a referral is made to a CPS manager for assignment and investigation. The new facility will centralize the latter process for child victims and families needing help. Currently, interviews mostly take place at a police station or social services offices. But examinations may occur at the hospital, and

subsequent treatment services can take place at yet another location.

"The purpose is for children who have been impacted by abuse and their caretaker to not have to go to different places to get service," Jennings-Holt said. "And it also prevents the child from having to tell their story over and over again to different people. We don't want to retraumatize children by us trying to do our jobs."

It should help not only the county but also Manassas and Manassas Park, which can schedule interviews there. Currently, the two cities often have to send children to Fairfax County for investigation or

examination.

Gehr said there's some consideration of eventually entering into a joint services agreement with the county that would govern the center. Until then, she said, it should make investigations slightly easier for the city, especially when the fall rolls around and kids are back in schools.

"I anticipate that as kids return to the classrooms full time, you're going to start seeing an increase, but you know, maybe not," Gehr said. "I have no way of knowing until we actually get in there and start getting the calls. But everybody's kind of bracing for impact."



Michele Gehr, director of social services for Manassas, says the city hasn't seen a resurgence in child protective services cases, but is preparing for one when schools reopen in the fall.

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# INSIDENOVA

## PRINCE WILLIAM



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# ODs on the Rise

## Local officials look for solutions to addiction

BY JARED FORETEK  
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The courts, police and social services agencies in Prince William County and Manassas are all trying to do more to stem the rise in opioid addiction and overdoses in the area, but many say it isn't enough to combat the easy access to highly addictive drugs and reverse national trends.

The number of overdoses and overdose deaths in the Prince William area has been

surging, with the vast majority of them attributed to opioids.

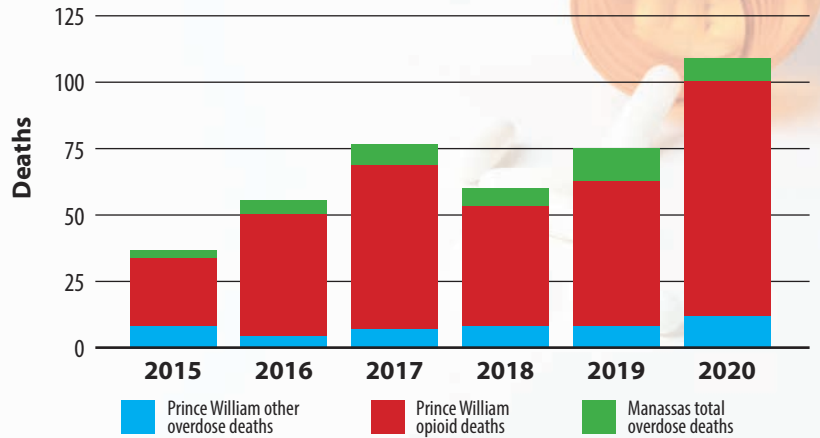
In Prince William, total overdose deaths shot up from 65 in 2019 to 101 in 2020. Opioid deaths went from 54 to 88 and deaths related to fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, jumped from 46 to 82. County police have not yet compiled statistics for this year.

In Manassas, the number of reported overdoses rose from 56 in 2019 to 64 in 2020 and was at 57 for the first eight months of 2021. In all of 2020 there were 10 fatal overdoses in the city. This year

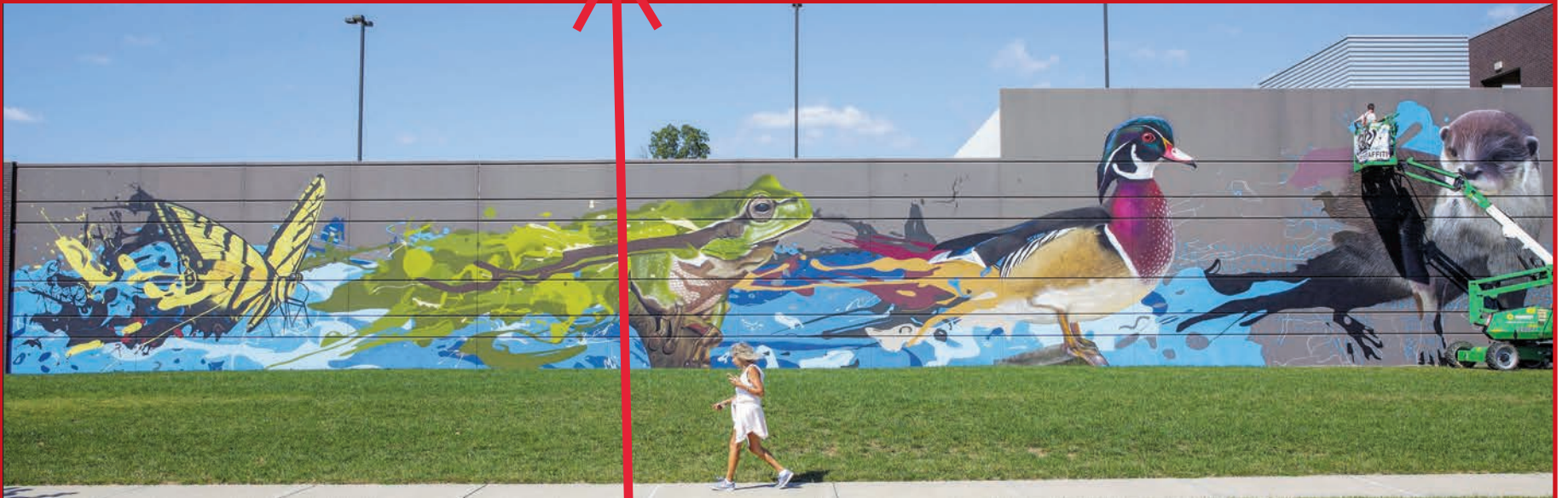
OVERDOSE >> PAGE 5

## Overdose Deaths

Total overdose deaths in Prince William County and the city of Manassas increased 48% from 2019 to 2020, with most of those related to opioids, including the synthetic fentanyl.



## A SPLASH OF COLOR



Hungarian artist TakerOne is transforming a drab parking garage wall at Belmont Bay into a mural representing some of the wildlife found in the nearby Potomac River, including a butterfly, a frog, a duck and an otter. The three-story mural, nearly 150 feet long, is part of George Mason University's Potomac Science Center in the riverfront community. A formal unveiling of the work is planned for Saturday. PHOTOS BY PAUL LARA | INSIDENOVA

### INSIDE

Read about how the mural came to be and see more photos

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through the end of August there had been seven.

First responders in both jurisdictions have increased distribution of naloxone, the life-saving overdose-reversal drug known more commonly by its brand name Narcan. Police and fire and rescue squads carry the drug. The Prince William County Community Services Board is also holding twice-weekly virtual Narcan training through the end of the year for area residents.

Prince William Commonwealth's Attorney Amy Ashworth is also searching for new solutions to the rise in overdoses. Earlier this month, she told the Manassas City Council that her office has been working to stand up the first drug court for adults to serve the three jurisdictions, but didn't say when she expected it to be up and running.

"We're working with the circuit court and criminal justice services, pretrial services," Ashworth said. "This would be the first time this jurisdiction has had a drug court, and the focus would be on addressing the underlying causes of substance abuse instead of criminalizing substance abuse."

Similar courts already exist in 44 Virginia jurisdictions and are intended to divert offenders from the traditional court



AMY ASHWORTH

system and jail time and into rehabilitation and treatment instead. Data compiled by the Supreme Court of Virginia's Office of the Executive Secretary indicate that so far in Virginia, the courts have driven down rearrest rates among drug offenders.

"Instead of incarcerating offenders, the drug treatment court docket offers a voluntary, therapeutic program designed to break the cycle of addiction and criminal behavior," the court's 2020 report reads. "The drug treatment court docket provides an opportunity for early, continuous, intense judicial supervision, treatment, mandatory periodic drug testing, community supervision and use of appropriate sanctions and other rehabilitation services."

County public health officials have said that the disruptions to social and work life caused by the pandemic have led to more mental health struggles for many, which in turn could have contributed to the dramatic increase in overdose deaths last year. But everyone agrees there are no silver bullets.

In a recent survey of Northern Virginia health providers conducted by Inova Health System as part of its regional Act on Addiction campaign, more than 70% of clinicians said they've seen an increase in mental health and addiction patients this year, and nearly 40% of surveyed clinicians said they believe access to resources is the biggest barrier

for patients.

Meg Carroll, who heads the Georgetown South Community Center in Manassas, says the prevalence of opioids affects almost everyone in the neighborhood, whether through addiction directly or the quality of life issues that come with it, in particular robbery.

When families come to her asking for advice on what to do for a loved one suffering from opioid addiction, she typically refers them to the Greater Prince William Health Center, which has locations in Manassas, Woodbridge and Dumfries. But in general she says good treatment options for those without health insurance or who may be undocumented are sparse. And treatment options only matter for those who agree to get help.

"The kid usually has to hit the absolute rock bottom before they'll go there," she said.

As a last resort, all community center staff have training and access to Narcan. Carroll has been asking for more attention to the problem from city government and police for some time now. She says neighborhood residents want more educational outreach events and more focus on the property crimes that can come with opioid use, but that many



MEG CARROLL

don't seem to want to acknowledge the issue.

At a recent City Council meeting, Manassas Police Chief Doug Keen talked about the lives his officers and other first responders have saved with the help of Narcan, but also said there are forces at play beyond the city, county and region.

"You see this problem going across this country, it's not unique ... but how people respond to it is different in each community," he said, adding that his officers regularly refer people suffering from addiction to social services.



DOUG KEEN

"But the users ... also have some responsibility of trying to get that help, staying with the program and making sure they follow the guidelines. There's no one easy fix for this."

In the meantime, Carroll has taken to using neighborhood meetings to try to help people spot and confront addiction in their families, as well as warning people to make sure items as small as patio furniture are tied down.

"All these kids, I mean, they're kids. ... They're someone else's sons and I don't understand - it's almost an apathy," Carroll said. "I don't know that [the opioid problem] is worse, I think that we're becoming inured to it. And that's scary."



# Women well-represented in Manassas police

## Force struggling in other areas as focus on diversity intensifies

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As police departments across the region emphasize diversity in hiring, Manassas Police Chief Doug Keen says his small department is leading the way, pointing to its recently released annual report showing that it has nearly twice the national rate of women sworn officers.

FBI data on police demographics nationwide from 2019 shows that women made up 13% of sworn officers inside departments across the nation. In Manassas, 24 of 101 sworn officers are women.

Keen told InsideNoVa this has a number of benefits. For one, having women officers as resources for women victims has been shown to be beneficial. As a result, hiring qualified women into the profession is increasingly a priority for departments everywhere. Keen says that having a relatively high proportion of women officers gives Manassas a leg up in recruitment.

“If you have a young woman that’s in middle school or high school and she’s thinking about law enforcement... if she sees a successful woman in law enforcement she sees her mentor,” Keen said. “She knows, ‘Hey, I can be successful in that profession.’”

Studies have also shown that departments often get different use-of-force outcomes with women on the job. According to a Pew survey, female officers are far less likely to use their weapon in the line of duty during their careers. In addition, male officers are more likely to agree that it is “more useful to be aggressive than to be courteous in certain parts” of their jurisdiction.

### MORE HISPANIC OFFICERS NEEDED

If the goal is to ultimately have a department that looks similar to the community it polices, as Keen says his is, the department still has a ways to go in one area in particular: the hiring of Hispanic officers. In its annual report, the police department reported that 69% of its officers were white, 13% African American and 11% Hispanic. By contrast, the Census Bureau estimates the city’s population is 36.6% Hispanic or Latino.

Keen said that interest in policing as a career is a challenge, but that the department has had some recent success recruiting Hispanic officers who moved from other departments last year after seeing the department’s public outreach following protests last summer. According to

Manassas data, the number of Hispanic officers has nearly doubled since 2016.

In response to that unrest over police-community relations last year, both the City Council and police department have said they’d like to get a clearer view of what the city’s residents think of its police force. The expectation is that they’ll get that throughout this year. Appointed in September, the city’s new equity and inclusion task force held its first community input session on Tuesday. Council member Tom Osina said he’s looking forward to seeing what it finds.

### DISPATCHING A CHALLENGE

One persistent concern about the department for some is its Spanish-language dispatch options. As of right now, the department often relies on a translating service for those who call and can’t speak English. According to Osina – who lives in the heavily Hispanic Georgetown South neighborhood where construction on the city’s new \$49 million public safety facility is underway – many residents will first call someone from the community center to then have their message translated to police.

“There’s a delay in terms of looking up a person that can actually speak Spanish there, and so we have not as many people who would report crime incidents and concerns who are more comfortable speaking Spanish than English making

those calls,” Osina said. “Clearly that’s a frustration versus calling the police, and it’s also a frustration for the police along the way.”

Keen said he doesn’t know exactly how many officers are fluent in Spanish, but he said the department tries to keep at least one Spanish-speaker on duty every shift.

“No matter who’s working ... days, evenings, nights, we always try to make sure you have a language-skilled person available,” Keen said. “Of course, whether they’re on the leave or they may be in training, that doesn’t always work out. But it does seem very rare that, whether it’s either a dispatcher or an officer, that we don’t have an internal resource that can help us connect with that language.”

When it comes to interacting with Manassas City Public School students – about half of whom are considered English-language learners – Keen says Spanish-language skills are a “high priority” for the department.

### GRANT APPROVED

Last year, the police department received approval for a Department of Justice grant that would fund two full-time positions dedicated solely to preventing truancy and subsequent juvenile crime. Different from school resource officers who work inside the school buildings, the officers would be based in the community, having what Keen calls “work space” setups in the Georgetown South Community Center and Jirani’s Coffeehouse in Old Town.

The program was delayed due to virtual-only schooling for much of the year, but Keen says the department would like to have the two officers in place by the end of the school year, with one being a Spanish speaker.

They’ll also have unique job descriptions within the department. The officers will be tasked with keeping up with students at risk of missing school, but they’ll also be expected to arrange afterschool programming for students and parents outside of the department’s walls. The officers will work under the department’s community services group, which already includes two Spanish speakers, Keen said.

“It’s a high priority ... finding those applicants, and finding the person that wants to do that job,” Keen said. “That means that they want that particular assignment.”