

Dear Chief: Is there a prescription drug abuse problem in Alamosa?

Dear Concerned Citizen: Recent data indicates that nearly 40 Americans die every day from prescription drug abuse and the number has tripled in the last 10 years. Although these numbers are national figures, it is common for APD officers and investigators to encounter large amounts of prescription drugs (pills) when conducting accidental (overdose) or intentional (suicide) non-criminal (suicide) death investigations. Prescription drug abuse is of nationwide concern and oftentimes isn't detected nor come to light until after someone has died, ended up in the hospital, or is arrested.

APD has seen a significant increase in people who are driving under the influence of prescription drugs which comes at a great cost to the taxpayer. While Alcohol analysis is relatively inexpensive (about \$25 per sample), prescription drug screening can cost 5 to 10 times this amount. Of our 175+ DUI arrests in 2012, the majority of testing costs derive from prescription drug analysis. In addition to DUI investigations we have experienced more prescription drug abusers involved in local property and street crime (burglaries/thefts/identity theft/prescription fraud/robbery/assaults). As an example, last fall we had a rash of residential burglaries committed by juveniles and young adults who were exchanging stolen property for prescription drugs (pills such as Oxycodone, Oxycontin, and Percoset).

Prescription drug abuse comes at a high cost to our community. Beyond drug testing, citizens rarely recuperate the entire loss of items stolen as a result of theft/id theft/burglary and never restore the personal violation of having someone pilfering through their homes, belongings, and personal information. Other costs incurred include rising insurance rates as a result of increases in claims and personnel resource costs to staff our courts and judicial processes. I could go on and on, but won't.

I wish there were a simple solution, but unfortunately we (law enforcement) are only one small piece of a very large puzzle. What we are doing is providing community education through communications like this one, we participate with projects and programs (DEA Prescription Drug Take-Back and San Luis Valley Prevention Coalition), we make referrals to our partners at Mental Health and Detox, and we investigate and bring offenders into the criminal justice system as a result of crimes they commit. But, this is not enough. Prescription drug abuse is a local and national issue that needs serious attention and the mutual cooperation of us all.

As citizens, you can contribute by ridding your home of excess and un-needed medications, by securing drugs (pills and medications) in locations not accessible to children or drug abusers, by reporting suspected drug abuse to police, by accessing available services if you, a family member, or a friend, need help. There are also plenty of good websites and articles concerning prescription drug abuse, so go online and learn more.

Craig Dodd, Chief of Police