



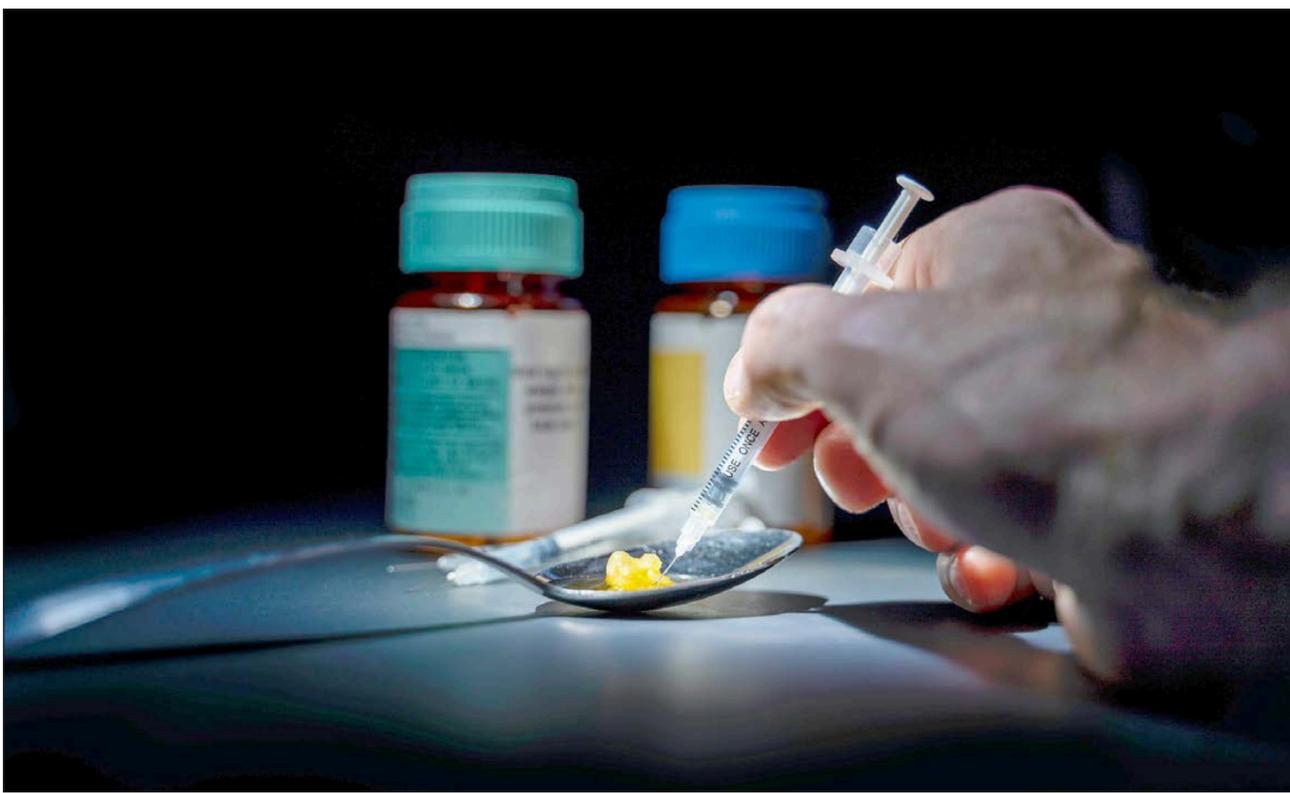
More than 4,000 frontline health care workers in Minnesota have already received their first coronavirus vaccinations, and the state expects to have received nearly 250,000 doses from the two approved manufacturers by the end of the month.

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OPIOID EPIDEMIC



Quietly lurking the dark, the opioid epidemic continues to grow in numbers and dangers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as local law enforcement continues to respond to overdoses in southern Minnesota. (Photo by Michael Longmire on Unsplash)

DANGER SIGNS

Growing number of ODs show opioids' grip on southern Minnesota tightening

By ANNIE GRANLUND
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As the stresses over social distancing, mask wearing and vaccine supplies continue, a silent killer lurks in the shadows.

In 2018, the South Central Drug Investigations Unit said opioid abuse was still "uncommon" in Steele County. At that time, Sgt. Andy Drenth, commander of the multi-agency task force, which includes the counties of Steele, Waseca, Freeborn and Faribault, was unaware of any deaths directly attributed to opioid abuse, convinced the area was simply "lagging behind." Drenth was spot on.

"A year and a half ago, there was a handful of Owatonna users who would pool their money together and make a trip up to North Minneapolis to pick up 5 or 6 grams," Drenth said last week. "Now they don't need to travel. It's here. They don't need to go very far."

The opioid epidemic reaches far beyond local accessibility of both prescription drugs and street heroin. A quick look at local statistics from the Overdose Detection Mapping Application Program shows that from August 2019 to the end of 2020, law enforcement in Steele and Rice counties know of 43 overdoses linked to opioid abuse — nine were fatal.

"It's here, it's real and it's affecting a lot of families

EDITOR'S NOTE

This story is the first in an occasional series on the growing problem of opioids in southern Minnesota, and how they're impacting those who come in contact with the drugs and the addicts.

and community members," said Sgt. Paul LaRoche, commander of the Cannon River Drug and Violent Offender Task Force, which covers Rice and Le Sueur counties. "The presence has gone up — opioids in our area have been on the rise specifically with a lot more fentanyl-laced heroin. A lot of what our overdoses have been is that elevated presence of fentanyl."

'The same ballpark'

The bulk of the known overdoses have been concentrated in the area's larger cities. Faribault has seen 14 of the 30 total overdoses in Rice County — two of which were fatal. Eleven of the 13 overdoses to take place in Steele County occurred in Owatonna, including all three of the fatalities. Despite the concentration in the larger cities, the epidemic is everywhere. Rural Rice County had a reported four overdoses, includ-

ing one fatality, between September 2019 and August 2020, and in Steele County town of Medford, population roughly 1,266, was home to one opioid-related overdose in the last year.

"We are all in the same ballpark," Drenth said about the epidemic. "It doesn't matter if it's greater Minnesota, out-state Minnesota, metro, the reservations — every other community is experiencing the same problem."

Even in the county of Le Sueur, with a total population that barely eclipses Owatonna's, opioids present a real and devastating problem. Le Sueur County Sheriff Brett Mason said they know of five over the past year, two of which were fatal, but emphasizes this is only what they know of.

"I can tell you these numbers aren't accurate based on the fact that I know there are more overdoses going on but they're not being reported," Mason said, adding that if an overdose victim is brought to the hospital before law enforcement can respond, the patient's information is private unless a criminal investigation is initiated. "It's tough and it's running rampant — we see that through the national data and locally. The opioid epidemic is certainly thriving and that is unfortunate."

See GRIP on 2A

Medford, Blooming Prairie school districts approve tax levy

By ASHLEY REZACHEK
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The Blooming Prairie and Medford School Boards approved their 2021 property tax levies on Monday.

The approval came after the boards held their annual Truth in Taxation hearings and heard updates on their budgets. Unlike the Owatonna School Board, Blooming Prairie didn't have any new voter-approved levies to discuss. The Legislature sets school districts' revenue formulas except for voter approved referendum, which neither district had in November. Additionally, an increase in local taxes doesn't necessarily mean an increase in revenue for the district, according to state law.

The Medford School Board approved a 2021 property tax levy with a 0.86% or \$15,039 increase and certified the levy at \$1.8 million.

The Medford school district has four separate funds including the general fund, food service fund, community service fund and debt service fund. The district's revenue is expected to come in at \$11.2 million, which is a decrease of 4.72%, or \$555,177, in revenue for 2020-21 compared to the previous year.

The Medford district's expenditures are expected to increase by 16.22%, or \$1.9 million, compared to the previous year. Medford's general fund spending:

- District and school administration — 5.3%
- District support services — 3.3%
- Regular instruction — 41.7%
- Vocational instruction — 2.2%
- Special education instruction — 11.3%
- Instructional support service — 5.0%
- Pupil support service — 8.5%
- Sites-buildings, equipment — 22.3%
- Fiscal and Other — 0.4%

Medford taxpayers should expect to see their 2021 school taxes split between the general fund (43%), the community education fund (2%) and the debt service (55%), according to the district.

The newly payable 2021 levy was certified at \$1,759,162.78. This is an increase of 0.86% or \$15,038.65 compared to the last levy. The levy will be collected in 2021 and will be recognized as revenue in the Fiscal Year 2022.

Blooming Prairie's tax levy

Blooming Prairie's total property tax levy is \$2.3 million, which is a 20% increase from the previous year. Blooming Prairie Superintendent Chris Staloch pointed out that the district had a negative 10% change in its levy the prior year.

"If you look at the funding history, you go back 10 years, you look at funding history, a lot of times when you have a negative percent change one year, you see a positive percent change the next year," Staloch said. "And a lot of that's driven by property values as they go up, student population, we've seen an increase in our student population."

The district is funded on a per pupil basis, meaning as it serves more students the higher the levy increases. Staloch said the district has been seeing a steady increase in enrollment over the last several years. Additionally, the superintendent pointed out the building project in conjunction with the Zumbro Education District would start on some of the levy dollars.

The Blooming Prairie district's overall revenue for the 2021 school year is expected to be \$11 million. The projected overall expenses is \$11.3 million. Most of the general funds will go toward staffing, Staloch says.

"One of the things to note is when we do a budget, we always overestimate our expenses and underestimate our revenues because we know there's a lot of variables that go into the school year and a lot of things that can come up that are hard to account for," Staloch said. "In the end it shakes out where usually we have a positive budget in the end."



Staloch



Ristau

Woman charged in connection with fatal crash on I-35

By SAM WILMES
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A driver who reportedly failed to stop on the interstate, setting off a series of rear-end crashes, including one that killed a metro man, has been charged with one count of criminal vehicular homicide and five counts of criminal vehicular operation.

Kaytlen Paige Greenlee, 22, of Adams, Minnesota, was charged by summons Thursday in Rice County District Court. One of the criminal vehicular operation counts is listed as a felony. The other four are gross misdemeanors.

Court documents state Greenlee was charged after the Sept. 25 crash

that took place near the Hwy. 19 overpass on Interstate 35.

At approximately 5:36 p.m., a southbound 2003 Chevy Trailblazer driven by Greenlee struck a 2012 Mini Cooper driven by Michael Rae Bendel-Stenzel, 55, of Edina, as Greenlee crossed the bridge deck. The Mini Cooper then struck a 2004 Dodge Dakota driven by Daniel John Otis, 60, of Northwood, Iowa, which then struck a 2019 Subaru Crosstrek driven by Jami Michawne Kenney, 49, of Faribault, whose vehicle was in front of the pickup.

Greenlee and her passenger, Megan Rebecca Koch, 25, of Austin, reported they were traveling south on I-35 toward Austin and hadn't seen the line of

stopped vehicles in the area, despite a notification on the GPS they were using indicating slow traffic ahead.

Court documents state that though Greenlee reported she tried to slow down before the crash, a forensic analysis of the vehicle showed the Trailblazer had been traveling at least 74 miles per hour in the seconds preceding the crash and that the brakes had not been applied.

Bendel-Stenzel, a pediatric hospitalist at Children's Minnesota, was killed in the crash. The passengers in the vehicle, Ellen Margaret Bendel-Stenzel, 53, and Linus Michael Bendel-Stenzel, 20, were both injured and taken to Hennepin County Medical Center. Ellen Bendel-Stenzel reported-

ly sustained multiple rib fractures and a torn aorta which required surgery to repair that night. Liinus Bendel-Stenzel reportedly suffered cuts and bruises. Greenlee and Koch reportedly sustained injuries in the crash deemed non-life threatening.

The Rice County Sheriff's Office, North Memorial Aircare, Northfield police and ambulance crews and Lonsdale ambulance/Fire Department assisted on scene.

Greenlee's first court appearance is scheduled for Jan. 20.

WEM senior the 10th person to die on Rice county roads this year, 3A

