Shaheen hosts heroin roundtable with police

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CLAREMONT — On Thursday, U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen met with members of local law enforcement, health care professionals, government officials, and educators for a roundtable on heroin at River Valley Community College. The event was also attended by college staff and students.

The visit to Claremont was the fourth in a series that Shaheen has done regarding the issue around heroin. “It is really helpful for me to address challenges on the ground. It is an effort to learn more about the challenges,” she said in her greeting to the group.

Enfield Police Chief Richard Crate started the discussion. “Right now we’re dealing with the prevention aspect. How do we deal with it? It is proving very difficult with addiction rates being so high. We take a hard line with sellers. They’re coming up from New York and they’re not the dealers we’re used to; they’re drug dealers in the truest form. We need to shut them down,” he said.

New Hampshire State Police Sgt. Chris Scott, “The drug dealers are coming up from New Jersey, coming into New Hampshire from I-91. Vermont and Massachusetts have been doing a great job of shutting that down. It is pushing them to use town roads and buses.”

“We’re taking good people and they’re becoming criminals,” Crate continued. “When a guy walks into a store to rob it without a mask, you know there’s a problem.”

Sgt. Scott agreed, “It is a massive problem. In 2013 there were 70 heroin deaths and 190 drug related deaths. In 2014, there were 300 drug related deaths and 90 of them were from heroin.”

Crate talked about the Attorney General’s Drug Task Force.

“We have the Drug Task Force,” he said. “But there’s issues with funding.”

Later, Claremont Police Chief Alex Scott talked more about the funding. “We don’t have our own drug unit. We have the sheriff’s office and the Attorney General, who has the drug task force. I used to send one of my officers to the task force and we’d get 100 percent reimbursement. Now we get more like 30 percent. That officer might be making $79,000 to $90,000 so it is a big cut,” he said.
“If I could send two officers I would. The task force is busy constantly. They are always saying ‘we need more manpower.’ If I take an officer off the street I lose that officer but all the serious crime is drug-related. They need to continue maintaining JAG (Justice Assistance Grant) funding,” Chief Scott continued.

Chief Crate followed up by saying, “The governor threw us a lifeline with funding in the last budget.”

Sgt. Scott commented on the success of the task force. “We are the most successful in the state, in task force history. This caught us off guard. This isn’t your typical group of users. It is hitting everybody.”

Liz Hennig of Communities United Regional Network of Sullivan agreed. “As long as people think it isn’t a middle class, average family problem, it is not going to change,” she said.

“It crosses all socioeconomic groups but especially hitting lower socioeconomic groups,” said Chief Scott. “People don’t have the resources, a factor that leads to use. I scratch my head over what they’re willing to put in their body to numb what they’re going through. They turn to drugs to make life better.”

Hennig said about 70 percent of those who are addicted have mental health issues.

“We have a huge gap as there are no psychiatry options around,” Hennig said. “We had West Central (Behavioral Health) but after their funding was cut they never recovered. They eliminated their substance abuse program.”

Chief Crate commented. “Even if we stopped the use right today, we’d still have another 50-60 years to deal with the addiction as it doesn’t go away. It is a life-long issue.”

Hennig agreed. “They need to have support and recovery. There is a need for some place for them to go. The need for continuity and hand holding is critical.”

Another aspect of the issue is getting information out about the problem. “We’ve been working on prevention at the schools. We have a 23 minute video we want to show at the high school from the state police. We have gathered data from the high school with a drug survey and now that middle school is doing the survey,” Hennig said.

“Messaging is really important. Parents talking to their kids is making a difference,” she continued.

Chief Scott spoke about the innovative approach Sullivan County is taking with rehabilitation of inmates. “We have a program at the county jail called TRAILS (Transitional Reentry and Inmate Life Skills). If they’re willing to get better, they can move from the 1920s-built jail to the TRAILS facility. The recidivism is down 50 percent,” he said.
The TRAILS program is used across the country as a model and officials speak about it at conferences.

Shaheen wrapped up the meeting by acknowledging what was shared with her.

“I’ve heard you loud and clear on the need for resources. I need to know what funding works the best in addition to trying to get the money. It is a huge issue, hopefully with the economy getting better we will have more resources. Let us know what your challenges are. The more we know what the challenges are the more we can try to help. It was inspiring to hear what the task force is doing and about the TRAILS program.”