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New Orleans DA Leon Cannizzaro announces two anti-opioid initiatives

District Attorney Leon Cannizzaro on Thursday (Nov. 7) announced two new initiatives to enhance New Orleans' fight to reduce opioid-related deaths.

First, the New Orleans City Council voted unanimously on Thursday to approve adoption of ODMAP (Overdose Detection Mapping Application Program), an initiative proposed by the Orleans Parish District Attorney's office on April 30. The software program collects and provides real-time overdose surveillance data to first responders across jurisdictions to support public health and public safety responses to high overdose activity.

"So much of New Orleans' street violence is linked to the trafficking of illegal narcotics, and yet overdose deaths recently surpassed the number of murders in our city," Cannizzaro said. "Given the urgency of the situation, I am pleased that the City Council today acted upon our recommendation. The ODMAP program has succeeded in other jurisdictions, enabling health officials, social workers and law enforcement authorities to respond quickly to the precise areas where overdoses and fatal overdoses have spiked."

The software was developed and donated by the federal Washington/Baltimore HIDTA program (High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas). The mapping tool enables first responders to track the frequency and severity of overdose calls, enabling a strategic analysis and response by health care providers, social workers and law enforcement. The data generated can serve as an early warning system about a particularly dangerous new drug supply, triggering enhanced treatment and prevention efforts. It can also support active police investigations targeting the most dangerous drug dealers impacting the city.

Assistant District Attorney Andre Gaudin Jr., the HIDTA unit prosecutor of Cannizzaro's office, worked for more than a year to educate and convince city officials of the value and importance of mandating ODMAP usage in New Orleans. The measure passed Thursday was supported by Dr. Jennifer Avegno of the New Orleans Department of Health, Dr. Emily Nichols of New Orleans EMS, Criminal Justice Commissioner Tenisha Stevens, Tyrell Morris of the Orleans Parish Communications District, and Councilman Jason Williams, who co-sponsored the ordinance with Council president Helena Moreno and Councilmember Kristin Gisleson Palmer.

Cannizzaro also announced that the OPDA's office has been awarded a two-year grant providing nearly \$357,000 to bring enhanced resources speedily to bear in the death investigations at fatal overdose crime scenes.

The proposed New Orleans Rapid Response Overdose Homicide unit combines a 24/7 on-call coroner's office investigator with a dedicated Orleans Parish assistant district attorney and a multi-jurisdictional case advocate to help assess, investigate and more efficiently prosecute narcotics dealers or providers responsible for overdose deaths.

Assistant District Attorney Alexandra Serpas has been tasked to review evidence gleaned from fatal overdose crime scenes and collaborate with the case advocate and federal partners at the U.S. Attorney's Office. Orleans Parish Coroner Dr. Dwight McKenna currently is seeking an experienced candidate to fill his new full-time investigator position funded through the grant.

"Both ODMAP and the overdose investigations grant reflect the continuing effort by our New Orleans-area joint task forces to target the worst, most violent drug dealers selling the most dangerous narcotics to our most vulnerable citizens," Gaudin said. "Together, we continue striving to reduce the number of fatal overdoses in our city by offering treatment to those in need and aggressively prosecuting those seeking to make a profit off the disease of addiction."

Both initiatives were realized by the Orleans Parish District Attorney's office working in close collaboration with Kristin Lyman of the Louisiana Public Health Institute and the FBI's New Orleans Gang Task Force directed by Special Agent Robert Baird.

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