



West Fargo Police Department

800 4th Ave E, Suite 2 West Fargo, ND 58078 | 701-433-5500 | westfargopolice.com

Denis E. Otterness
Chief of Police

House Bill 1287

Good morning members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. I want to thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Denis Otterness and I am the Chief of Police for the City of West Fargo. I have been a sworn law enforcement officer for the past 30 years and have served in my current role since September of last year.

I am appearing before you and offering my testimony today in full support of House Bill 1287. During my 30 year law enforcement career I have spent a great deal of time addressing, responding to, and witnessing first-hand the damage and destruction that controlled substances have on our communities and families.

By way of background, I think it's important you know that prior to coming to West Fargo I spent a majority of my 30 year law enforcement career working for the City of Bloomington, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. During this time I worked 10 ½ years in my department's Special Investigation Unit, in an undercover capacity, primarily investigating drug and human trafficking cases. For nearly eight of those years I was assigned to the Drug Enforcement Administration as a Task Force Officer investigating, disrupting and dismantling large scale drug trafficking organizations. Following my assignment at the Drug Enforcement Administration I spent nearly six years testifying as an expert witness in United States District Court, in the District of Minnesota, in Federal drug and firearms trafficking trials.

I was involved in conducting drug trafficking investigations on a local, regional and national level as the nationwide opioid epidemic took hold on our communities and drug trafficking cartels began to flood our communities with Methamphetamine that was nearing 100 percent purity. The surge in opioid related use, mainly heroin at that time, and methamphetamine use was astonishing. It is important to know as well that Minneapolis, a source location for drug traffickers in the Fargo/Moorhead/West Fargo region, was well known to have some of the most potent and pure heroin in the entire United States.

Over the course of the last several years a new and more deadly trend has emerged in drug trafficking, the sale of synthetic opioids such as Fentanyl and Carfentanil, along with its use as a cutting/mixing agent in other controlled substances, particularly heroin. This trend, along with the spiking increase in heroin use has led to an explosion in overdoses and overdose-related deaths in our communities.

The City of West Fargo has experienced a tremendous amount of growth over the last 15 - 20 years. I want to provide you just a snapshot of how reported overdoses have impacted the City of West Fargo

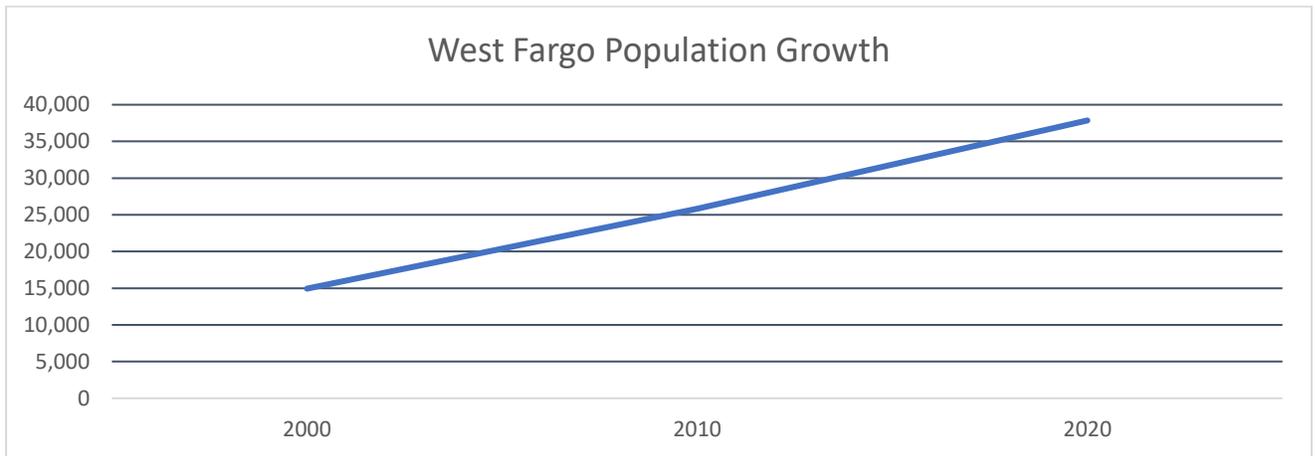


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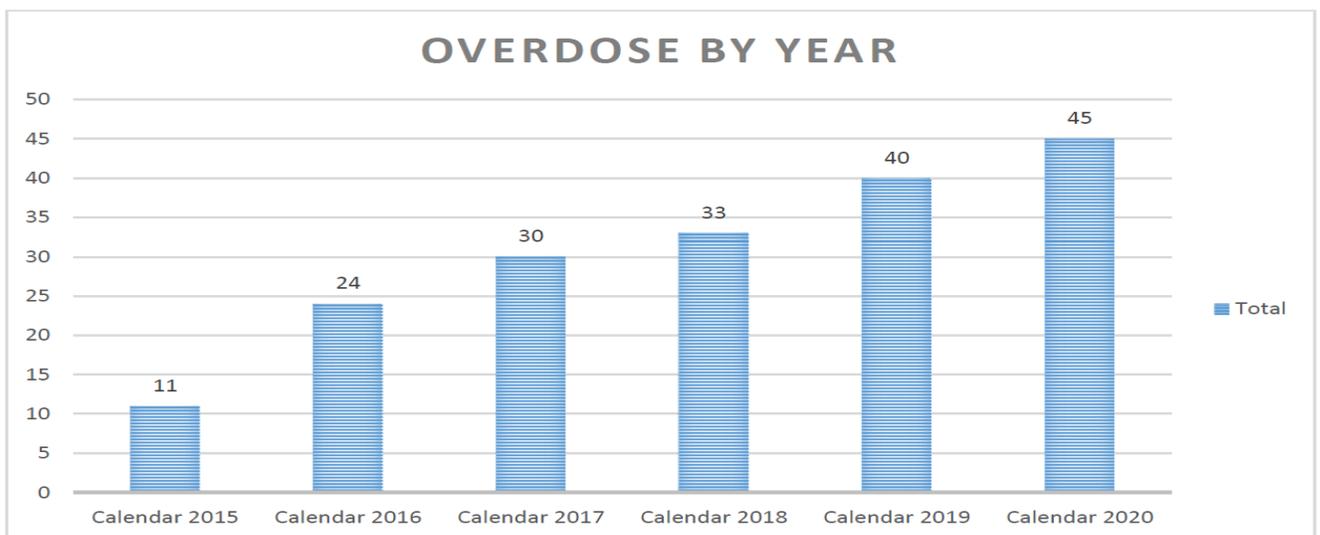
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over the past five years. Below you will find two graphs, one that outlines our community's growth and the other that details the number of narcotics related overdoses that my officers have responded to since 2015.



Source: Wikipedia



Source: West Fargo Police Department



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Many law enforcement leaders, particularly those in communities that have made Narcan widely available, understand we are receiving and reporting overdose statistics that are the tip of the iceberg. With the prevalence of Narcan it is widely known that many more overdoses are occurring in our communities than are being reported to law enforcement. Narcan is also only effective in addressing opioid-related overdoses.

I am a very strong proponent of treatment option for low-level offenders and those struggling with addictions, in addition to being a strong proponent of North Dakota's Good Samaritan language. I am also, however, steadfast in my belief that there needs to be a tool in place to hold drug traffickers accountable, particularly those that are responsible for distributing narcotics that are causing the death of so many members of our communities. As it stands right now, there is no means to prosecute those responsible for causing the overdose death of someone by trafficking in controlled substances. In other words, you can sell someone controlled substances and sell someone controlled substances that causes an overdose death and the penalties are the same.

I want to thank you again for the opportunity to be here today and will answer any questions you might have. Thanks again!

Denis Otterness
Chief of Police