



NEWS

JB Pritzker, Governor

Michael D. Kleinik, Director

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Illinois Department of Labor Warns of Hazards Posed by Illicit Drugs to First Responders

Drug Tool Kit Available Online from National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health

SPRINGFIELD – First responders have always had dangerous jobs, but concern over police, fire and medical personnel being injured by illicit drugs while doing their jobs is growing.

This danger has been greatly elevated by the increased prevalence of fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is 50 times stronger than heroin and that can pose great danger to first responders on aid calls and during criminal investigations.

A “tool kit” of materials to help train emergency personnel on staying safe while working around illicit drugs was recently compiled by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). The materials, including training videos, downloadable posters and postcards, are available at <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fentanyl/toolkit.html>

“Our police, fire and medical first responders have extremely difficult jobs. But as they rush to save others’ lives, they need to also protect their own. Synthetic opioids such as fentanyl are extremely dangerous,” said Michael Kleinik, director of the Illinois Department of Labor.

Additional training on the threat illicit drugs pose to first responders is desperately needed, said Lockport Police Chief Terry Lemming, who is also past president of the Illinois Drug Enforcement Officers Association. “We especially need education on the dangers of fentanyl because a tiny little bit could kill you.”

Firefighters know these dangers all too well, according to State Fire Marshal Matt Perez.

“In most overdose cases our first responders are the first on the scene to initiate medical intervention,” said Perez. “Being aware of the health risks present in an environment with illicit drugs, and how to mitigate them, will help keep our first responders safe while providing treatment to their patients.”

Lemming believes the problem is likely going to get worse.

“Right now, there is more fentanyl in the country than ever before,” said Lemming. “Some people predict that fentanyl will take over for heroin and cocaine because it’s cheaper, it’s more potent. And if fentanyl does take over and really starts being *the* drug, we’ve got a world of trouble ahead of us.”

Lemming and Lockport Police Investigations Commander John Arizzi said a recent fatality involving suspected fentanyl prompted the department to take extra precautions and not field test the drugs at the crime scene. Instead Arizzi did the testing wearing full protective gear. But Lemming points out that in such a case, officers had warning of what they were likely up against.

“My concern is officers who encounter fentanyl during a regular activity like a traffic stop. I don’t think they are prepared because they don’t know what it is at first,” said Lemming.

“I know it sounds crazy but treat everything as if it has fentanyl in it because we are seeing it not just in heroin but now mixed with cocaine,” said Arizzi, noting that officers also need to take care not to allow their police dogs to be exposed either. “They can certainly be killed by it.”

NIOSH offers some guidelines for all first responders who must work in an environment that contains such drugs:

- Do not eat, drink, smoke, or use the bathroom while working in an area with known or suspected fentanyl.
- Do not touch the eyes, mouth, and nose after touching any surface potentially contaminated with fentanyl.
- Field testing of fentanyl or its analogues is not recommended due to an increased risk of exposure to responders performing field testing.
- Avoid performing tasks or operations that may aerosolize fentanyl due to increased exposure risks.
- Wash hands with soap and water immediately after a potential exposure and after leaving a scene where fentanyl is known or suspected to be present to avoid potential exposure and to avoid cross contamination. Do not use hand sanitizers or bleach solutions to clean contaminated skin.