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HEALTH

For many Palm Springs homeless, heroin comes before food and water. The problem is getting worse.

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The day started off lucky for Blake Pricer. Overnight, he had locked himself in a laundry room at the Ace Hotel in Palm Springs and slept a few hours in relative safety. After waking up to the sound of pounding on the door from hotel staff wanting to reclaim the territory, Pricer was back on the street and back to his relentless quest.

The one thing Pricer needed was heroin, which meant the first thing he needed was cash. Good fortune came through when he began opening mailboxes and quickly found $13 and some checks he hoped to sell later.

With that small amount of money in his hand, Pricer, who is 26, thin and tattooed with shorts hanging past his knees, easily found someone to sell him the drug. He then rode a stolen bicycle downtown to a cooling center where homeless people like him could rest, eat and take a shower. He parked the bike and walked inside to a bathroom where he clandestinely injected heroin into his arm. It wasn't quite 9 a.m.

"I've done it for so long," he said, "it's nothing for me to walk in there and walk out five minutes later with everything done, clean, shot."

Pricer began using heroin when he was 17. Like many people, he got into it after using prescription drugs approved by a doctor. When he was a freshman at Palm Springs High School and playing football, Pricer was prescribed Vicodin to relieve back pain from weightlifting. He started abusing the powerful and addictive painkiller, which led to stealing pills from his sick father. When those supplies ran out, a friend pushed heroin as a cheap and available alternative.

In the past decade, Pricer has had short stints in rehab and jail. In February, after exhausting the help offered by his family, he became homeless. He is one among a growing local homeless population that in January was estimated at 459 people across nine cities in the Coachella Valley. Palm Springs accounted for nearly a third of them.

Addiction is one of many factors that can precede a person becoming homeless, or it can arise as a person tries to cope with the added stress of not having a permanent home. Assessments by people working with the area's homeless population vary, but many say heroin is becoming more common.

Fighting addiction: Opioid drugs to treat opioid addiction? It's part of a treatment plan at the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage

"Meth and heroin have become the drugs available and the drugs that actually remove a lot of their suffering," said Arlene Rosenthal, president of Well in the Desert, a charity aiding the homeless in Palm Springs.

Many people, including some who are homeless and others in law enforcement, said meth remains the most common drug on the streets. Using both is not unusual, as Pricer did multiple times over the course of a day in

August when he allowed a reporter and photographer from The Desert Sun to follow him.

Rosenthal said more cases of heroin use in recent months have led her to make no distinction between the two drugs' prevalence. She said both are more common than heavy alcohol use.

Heroin and drug addiction is not a problem only among the homeless as evident in the present national crisis surrounding opioid addiction and deadly drug overdoses, but in Palm Springs, away from the parts of the country hardest hit by the drug epidemic, the problem may be most visible in the people living outside night after night.

The number of opioid-related overdose deaths has quadrupled in the U.S. since 1999, and there are now at least 91 such deaths every day across the country. More than 64,000 Americans died of drug overdoses last year, most of them involving opioids.

"For Americans under the age of 50, drug overdoses now are the leading cause of death," Deputy U.S. Attorney General Rod Rosenstein said in June.

President Donald Trump in October declared the opioid crisis a national public health emergency, a designation that should expand access to care. Critics, however, said that with no more funding to combat the epidemic, the declaration on its own would have a limited impact.

On Nov. 1, days after Trump's declaration, his opioid commission released more than 50 recommendations for the president and Congress to take up.

Much of the national epidemic has been concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest. California counted 1,966 opioid overdose deaths in 2015, few enough to have one of the lowest opioid death rates of any state, according to an analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation.

In Riverside County, a large stretch of Southern California that includes Palm Springs and more than 2.3 million people, overdose deaths involving heroin have risen over the past decade, according to a Desert Sun analysis of county data derived from death reports. In 2005, 21 death records mentioned heroin. In 2013, the count surpassed 50 for the first time and remained that high for at least two more years.

Among the homeless, a trick to revive someone who is overdosing is to put ice down their pants. Justin Bramblett, a meth user who's been homeless in Palm Springs for a decade, said that on hot days McDonald's will sometimes hand out free ice that can be used to stay cool or possibly save a life.

"Pretty much everybody does drugs to get through the day," said Bramblett, 48, one morning after spending the night sleeping along the river wash south of downtown. "It takes away the pain."

He agreed with others who said more of the homeless are using heroin, and like others he said younger people seem more inclined to use it. Heroin is often just called "black"; meth is "white."

Finding black can be hard at first if you don't know who to ask, Bramblett said. "But once you get the who, where and what, then you can find it."

After shooting heroin in the bathroom, Pricer walked to a public park about a block away from the cooling center. The day was already hot, so he took off his shirt and sat down on a bench. He was soon closing his eyes and leaning forward as if falling asleep, sometimes in the middle of a sentence. Then he would drop his cigarette or someone would speak, and he'd sit up alert. This would happen over and over again.

Four weeks earlier, Pricer and his girlfriend were talking about trying rehab. She had since gone through with it and checked into a treatment center in San Clemente. He made excuses and didn't try. Now he was embarrassed when

they talked.

“My girlfriend looks at me in the eyes now and sees bullshit,” he said.

A blonde guy rode into the park on an orange bicycle, the kind of beach cruiser rented to tourists. He asked Pricer if he had any heroin, and Pricer handed over a black eyeglasses case.

Jake Stewart, 34, grew up in the area and said he’s used heroin off and on for 10 years. He also started with pills. He and his wife became homeless after moving back to Palm Springs, but Stewart didn’t know where she was that morning. She’s the one who traded some heroin for the beach cruiser.

Stewart walked the bike just outside the park to a grassy area in front of an apartment building. He opened the glasses case and pulled out an orange-capped syringe, a metal spoon and a black pebble of heroin. He cleaned the syringe with bottled water left on a nearby patio table and crushed the heroin in the bowl of the spoon with a little of the water. He drew the dark liquid up the needle before turning it around and injecting it into his left arm. Some large trees covered him in shade and possibly blocked him from being seen by passing cars, but Stewart was in plain view of the sidewalk and anyone who would happen to walk out of the building.

It was about 10 a.m. and Stewart pointed out that while he hadn’t had anything to eat or drink, he’s gotten his first heroin fix for the day.

Heroin users treat withdrawal like a sickness. Saying you’re sick means you’re overdue for a hit. “I need to get well” is one way to casually ask if someone has any heroin.

“It’s kind of like having the flu,” Stewart said about the withdrawal, “but you would rob somebody to get rid of it.”

A homeless couple, Pete Gallagher, who goes by the nickname Muppet, and Shawna Maldin, joined Pricer in the park after spending the night sleeping outside of a nearby church.

Gallagher, 36, said he used to work as an EMT and had been living outside for two years. He used meth and has a “divine hatred” of heroin because of what he’s seen it do to people like his girlfriend.

Gallagher said he knows their situation is bad, but like other homeless people also addicted to drugs he’s not clear on pinpointing what he needs to do to turn his life around.

“I’m sure I could change a lot of things,” he said. “I could change my priorities … start focusing on healthy goals.”

As they sat in the park, another man rode up on a bicycle and warned them that the city police were driving around checking people for outstanding warrants. Fearing where any run-in with cops might lead, the group split up. Gallagher and Maldin went one way and Pricer, who was wanted on a possession charge, hid in the parking lot of some nearby apartments. Soon two large pickup trucks marked Palm Springs Police Department drove by.

Earlier in the summer, Palm Springs Police Officer Max Reynoso went out like he does most mornings at the start of his shift to patrol downtown and check on homeless residents. On that day he found five people in the shady breezeway of a partly vacant office building downtown.

Among them was Ryan Robinson, 34, who said he came to Southern California from Tennessee with the goal of beating his heroin addiction. For the past year and a half, following time in rehab and a sober-living home, he had continued to use the drug while living on the streets in Palm Springs.

Robinson wore a loose-fitting t-shirt and shorts that exposed scars on his legs. He said he started using heroin following time abusing painkillers he stole from his father.

He said he wants to move back to Tennessee but first needed to stop using drugs. He considered methadone treatment but in order to do that he needed to get a new ID so he can go to the clinic in Palm Springs that dispenses the daily medication that helps people through heroin withdrawal.

Until all of that comes together, Robinson said, he'll continue with the daily struggle to keep the sickness at bay. Nothing could be worse than being homeless and using heroin, he said. Indeed, the two things sometimes seemed inseparable.

"It's either a big part of the reason they're homeless, or it's what they do to numb the pain," he said.

Reyoso suspected Robinson or the people he was with were carrying drugs, but he didn't ask about it and didn't ask to search them. He just warned them to stay out of trouble.

Reynoso estimated that about half of the homeless people he encounters use drugs, with meth being by far the most common. He said he will respond to an occasional heroin overdose, but much of the calls are about homeless people being nuisances. Unless someone is creating a serious problem or openly using drugs, arrests aren't typically made. Under current state law, drug offenders rarely stay in jail long anyway.

"I can arrest them today, and if I was on an 18-hour shift, I'd probably see them on the street by the end of my shift or the next day," he said.

Leaders in Palm Springs have struggled to get a handle on the homelessness crisis, especially since the closing of the only nearby shelter in June. The cooling center operated by Well In Desert offers a place for people to come during the day, plus some food and shower facilities, but it does not house people overnight.

Ginny Foat, a long-time member of the Palm Springs City Council who's been involved in homelessness issues, said the local homeless response has focused on helping people with direct and short-term assistance, people who are often referred to as "situationally homeless."

The chronically homeless, many of whom are facing addiction or other mental health issues, pose a separate problem often requiring more substantial help that the city alone can't provide, she said.

Foat, who will be leaving office at the end of the year, said that in a region with many drug rehabilitation centers, there is still a serious lack of available treatment options for someone who is homeless or can't afford treatment for another reason.

For Palm Springs to take on its drug problem, she said, the city will have to look beyond the homeless.

"It's not that people who use drugs are homeless," Foat said. "We know it's a big problem in all communities."

Beyond the cooling center and daily meals Well in the Desert offers the homeless, the charity runs four homes where it offers housing in exchange for volunteer labor and a promise to not use drugs.

For some homeless drug users, it's been the kind of recovery program they needed when nothing else worked.

Jade Gutierrez, 26, had already been in rehab four times between stints of homelessness when Rosenthal offered her another possible solution earlier this year. If Gutierrez was willing to work in Well in the Desert's kitchen and stay off heroin, the charity would provider her a place to live.

From the kitchen, Gutierrez moved to helping manage the cooling center. She said it was good that she didn't get paid because her past tendency was to get a job only to lose it when she spent the money on drugs.

“Toward the end of my addiction in this past run, I just was sick and tired of it,” said Gutierrez, who took methadone to cope with withdrawal. “I was sick and tired of having to lose my job and figure out how to pay my rent or (else) end up on the streets, steal, whatever you had to do to support your habit.”

Gutierrez started using heroin in high school as a way to fit in with people she wanted to be friends with. When she was 18, she went to rehab for the first time. After finishing high school, she tried community college courses and sought training in cosmetology and medical assisting. She blamed her addiction for stopping her from completing that work.

“On top of the physical addiction, you have the mental addiction,” she said. “It becomes a habit, it becomes a ritual, something that you do on a daily basis like maybe shower at night.”

At any given time the Well in the Desert may have 25 people living in four homes. A.J. Wheeler, 47, became one of them in June. After being released from jail in February, Wheeler was back to being homeless and using heroin.

He grew up in the San Gabriel Valley and never did well in school. He said he’s been diagnosed with schizoaffective mood disorder and struggles with undiagnosed attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. He discovered at an early age that alcohol and drugs were a way to calm his jumpy mind.

He said be began using heroin in 2005. A scar on his lower torso is the result of a skin graft to fix an injury he got when he overdosed.

“I’m lucky that I didn’t overdose and die from the use of it, and I got a chance to help myself,” Wheeler said. “It’s got to be me first, and then I can help others.”

Over the summer, Wheeler was waking up early seven days a week to help Well in the Desert prepare the lunches it feeds the homeless around Palm Springs. Past drug treatment programs never stuck, he said, but helping gave him something to do other than drugs.

“Today I don’t want to stick a needle in me," he said. "Today I feel good about me.”

After dodging the police, Pricer spent the next several hours hanging out and getting high with friends who rent places in a former hotel now offering rundown apartments near Palm Springs’ trendy uptown district.

In one apartment at the Sunset Palms apartments, Pricer met a man around the same age as him and a pregnant woman mopping the floor near the bathroom. The studio apartment was packed with furniture, including a double bed missing its sheets. Thin curtains were tacked over the windows, still allowing plenty of sunlight to enter the room. A page from a magazine taped over the hole in the front door where the doorknob should be was coming loose. Everyone was sweating.

Pricer opened his backpack and dumped a pile of instant oatmeal packets on the bed. He had stolen them the day before from the hotel next door. As he smoked meth, the apartment door was open enough to create a clear line of sight to a man and woman less than 100 feet away who were putting the top up on their convertible before walking into the hotel.

Pricer prepared a goofball, a mix of heroin and meth, and injected it. It had been about three hours since he shot up in the downtown bathroom. An hour later, in another apartment at Sunset Palms where another couple lived, he used more of both drugs.

The apartments, which have been untouched by efforts to improve some of Palm Springs’ more dilapidated structures, had two swimming pools. One was empty and the other was nearly empty except for a couple of feet of

brown water with small fish that Pricer said were there to eat mosquito larvae.

Pricer walked past the pools and the boarded-up windows on some rooms to a back alley with a concrete wall that had been heightened, he said, to keep transients from hopping between lots.

“Everything here is just a band-aid, a band-aid, a band-aid,” Pricer said. “It reminds me of heroin because you do heroin and it’s a band-aid for 20 or 30 minutes.”

A person of any background could be prescribed an opioid as Pricer was and then, maybe because of mental stress or a genetic predisposition, progress toward addiction, said Heather Gaedt, a clinical psychologist in Palm Desert who works with people facing addiction.

“Usually it’s the stereotype that it’s the person on the street,” she said. “It’s not that scenario at all for most people. It’s seen everywhere.”

Gaedt said the increase in heroin addiction she’s seen appears mostly in middle- and upper-class families. A major factor in the increase, she said, is opioid pills becoming harder to obtain on the street.

Entering a drug rehab center can have lasting benefits even if the person ends up using drugs again, she said, but rehab is often most effective when a person has already tried another program, such as outpatient treatment, and not been successful.

“I haven’t really met an addict who’s active in their disease who says, ‘I want to go to rehab,’” Gaedt said.

Pricer said his own experiences with rehab didn’t work because he never learned how to stop a relapse when the treatment was over. Looking back, he said, his time in rehab was like a vacation.

“I know that what I’m doing is wrong and what I’m doing is constantly hurting myself and consistently hurting my family,” he said. “But I can ironically use all of my intelligence that I’m born with and blessed with to achieve what it takes to get high, but I can’t use that intelligence to cease that disgusting behavior.”

Blake told all of his friends at Sunset Palms about the checks he found in mailboxes that morning. This was a "jackpot," he said.

The personal check for $265 could maybe get him half that amount in cash. Possibly more. Then there were the six blank business checks. Someone would know how to get money with those.

Pricer thought about spending $70 to get a hotel room for a night. Maybe he could get $100 worth of heroin. Whatever was left, he said, would go to his girlfriend in rehab.

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