

Police departments carry overdose antidote

Narcan, AEDs and body cameras used in Blaine County

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Newly purchased automated external defibrillators, or AEDs, sit stacked in the Blaine County Sheriff's Office. Photo courtesy of Blaine County Sheriff's Office

A potentially life-saving drug administered to people overdosing on opiates is being increasingly carried by first responders in Blaine County.

Narcan, the nasal-spray version of the overdose-antidote drug naloxone, has divided law-enforcement agencies across the nation; debate rages among police chiefs and sheriffs in areas hard-hit by the opioid epidemic about whether it's officers' responsibility to administer the drug to overdose victims. In Blaine County, the trend is that more agencies are carrying the drug.

Wood River Fire & Rescue and the Hailey Fire Department, which work in tandem, carry Narcan, according to Wood River Fire & Rescue Chief Bart Lassman. So too does the Ketchum Fire Department, and Sun Valley Acting Assistant Fire Chief Tann Robrahn said that department's Narcan should arrive before the end of the holidays. The Bellevue Fire Department doesn't respond to medical calls—the city is within the Wood River Ambulance District and served by a Wood River Fire & Rescue station—so the department doesn't carry Narcan, according to Fire Chief Greg Beaver.

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Blaine County Sheriff Steve Harkins said the Sheriff's Office and the Ketchum Division do not carry Narcan, but he's working on obtaining it and is exploring possible suppliers.

Robrahn said Sun Valley's Narcan will initially be on Fire Department trucks but may be shared with the Police Department. The city still needs to craft policies on the drug, including determining exactly who will carry it, before it's put into use, he said.

The Bellevue Marshal's Office does not carry Narcan, according to Marshal Ross Scaggs, and neither does the Hailey Police Department, according to Assistant Chief Dave Stellars. Stellars said that's because of the length of training involved with taking on new equipment, and because Wood River Fire & Rescue and the Hailey Fire Department have just as fast of a response time within the city.

Like Narcan, automated external defibrillators, or AEDs, are life-saving tools that are also increasingly carried by law enforcement. An AED automatically analyzes heart rhythm, and if it detects a problem, delivers a shock to restore a normal rhythm. The device doesn't require the amount of training that a manual defibrillator does.

While manual defibrillators, which often also have automatic operation modes, are carried by Wood River Fire & Rescue and the Hailey Fire Department, as well as the Ketchum and Sun Valley fire departments, the Blaine County Sheriff's Office only recently began carrying AEDs. The Sun Valley Police Department also has AEDs.

The Bellevue Marshal's Office and Hailey Police Department do not have AEDs, and Stellars said the devices aren't at the top of his list to buy, again because of ambulance response time in Hailey.

"We've never been in a situation where we had to use them," Stellars said.

Use of another piece of equipment in the national spotlight—body cameras—is split across law-enforcement agencies in the county. Officers in the Blaine County Sheriff's Office and its Ketchum Division wear cameras, as do officers in the Bellevue Marshal's Office, according to Harkins and Scaggs, but the Sun Valley and Hailey police departments do not equip officers with body cameras.

However, Stellars said equipping officers with body cameras is a priority for the department, and the purchase and use of body cameras will likely begin during fiscal 2018 or early in fiscal 2019.

"Our officers sometimes respond to calls with the Sheriff's Office," he said, "and they really like having them."

Stellars said the challenge to implement the devices is not the purchase cost—grants are readily available—but the training, policy development and software and video storage support required by the use of cameras.

"They're all great tools, but implementing them is a long process," he said of body cameras and other new pieces of equipment.

All the county's law enforcement agencies except the Bellevue Marshal's Office have cameras mounted in their patrol cars, but Scaggs said the new Marshal's Office patrol vehicles that he hopes to buy in 2018 will likely have them.
