

CATHOLIC HERALD

Serving the Archdiocese of Milwaukee
catholicherald@archmil.org ■ 414-769-3500

 Cedar Community
SERVING SENIORS SINCE 1953



LIFE THE WAY IT SHOULD BE ...
THE WAY YOU WANT IT
FIND YOUR FREEDOM HERE >>>

**YOUR FAMILY.
OUR PRIVILEGE.**



**Clement
Manor**

Providing a continuum of
care for more than 30 years

Sponsored by the School Sisters of St. Francis clementmanor.com

'BIGGER STORM ON THE WAY,' PREDICTS ATTORNEY GENERAL

February 26 2016 | Written by Bill Kurtz, Special to Catholic Herald Family | Category: Family |

Wisconsin Attorney General Brad Schimel had just completed his speech on opiate abuse to the Wisconsin Council of Religious and Independent Schools Feb. 12 and was leaving the Country Springs Hotel when a hotel employee stopped him briefly. The man told Schimel how a friend, whose father had been the man's soccer coach, died of a heroin overdose last summer.

"I've never spoken to a group without someone coming up to me afterwards and sharing a personal tragedy, where their lives have been turned inside out," Schimel said a few minutes later. "It could be doctors, police officers or educators."

Schimel told the educators that the number of Wisconsin deaths attributed to opiates (heroin or prescription medications) increased 495 percent from 2000 to 2013. If traffic fatalities had increased 495 percent, he joked, "speed limits would be 15, and we wouldn't let people drive until they were 35."

The attorney general, a member of St. Anthony Parish, Pewaukee, called for a sense of urgency in dealing with opiate abuse.

"We like to think it's an urban problem," Schimel said. "This is happening to kids in every school district, every community. These are kids who are active in sports, excelling in school activities."

There were about 850 opiate deaths statewide in 2014, Schimel said. Statistics have not been completed for last year, but he said that if the trend of increasing opiate deaths continued, "I expect (it) will be the number one cause of accidental deaths in 2015."

Schimel warned that "there's an even bigger storm on the way." He explained that "nearly four out of five heroin users began by using prescription painkillers." But as law enforcement has cracked down on "pill mills" that provide painkillers to abusers, many move to heroin.

"It's cheaper and easier to get than pills," Schimel said of heroin. Addicts "start out by popping pills. It seems harmless, because a doctor prescribed them. Kids think they're less harmful than heroin or cocaine." Instead, he said opiates "kill more than heroin and cocaine combined.

"If we can get abuse of painkillers under control," Schimel added, Wisconsin can avoid an epidemic of heroin deaths. He noted that heroin use tends to peak every few decades, and the last upsurge in the 1960s and 1970s was concentrated in urban areas, although the heroin then was much less potent.

"Most (painkiller addicts) die before they ever get to heroin," Schimel said. He pointed out that Wisconsin ranks second in the nation in robberies of pharmacies.

"We have more than California, Florida, Texas, New York- every state but Indiana," the attorney general said.

A few other statistics Schimel provided the size of the problem:

There are about twice as many painkiller overdose deaths as traffic fatalities in Wisconsin.

There are more deaths from painkiller overdoses statewide than from heroin and cocaine combined.

There are more opiate deaths than murders in Milwaukee County.

Schimel said there were 163,000 opiate addicts in the state in 2013.

"We will not arrest our way out of this problem," he warned. "We don't have treatment for 5,000. We need you on the front end of this, to communicate this message."

According to Schimel, opiate use starts as early as 12 or 13, and 70 percent of abusers get prescription medicines from friends or relatives. But he said it could be harder for parents to recognize signs of abuse, compared to users of marijuana or cocaine, who "are obvious, they stagger, the signs are pretty obvious." He warned parents to "treat prescription drugs as you would a loaded gun."

The attorney general told educators "you have a great opportunity to reach families, both parents and kids. If we work together, we can get out of this."