Anti-overdose aid debut is closer
Training clears way for police to carry nasal spray on patrols

By REBECCA D. O’BRIEN 
STAFF WRITER

Within days, police patrols across Bergen County could begin to carry Narcan, a nasal spray that is being promoted as an effective way to counter heroin and opioid overdoses before they can become fatal.

On Monday, police from more than 30 Bergen towns became the first municipal law-enforcement officers to receive training on how to use Narcan, paving the way for them to administer it in emergencies.

Equipping local police with Narcan marks the latest response to an alarming surge of heroin addiction and overdoses in the county, officials said. Bergen has had 28 confirmed heroin-overdose deaths so far in 2014, compared to 27 in 2013, according to the Bergen County Prosecutor’s Office.

Police are often the first to arrive at the scene of reported overdoses, officials said, but they have had to wait for emergency medical personnel to administer the antidote, which works for opioid painkillers such as oxycodone as well as heroin. Narcan has been credited with saving dozens of lives in North Jersey over the past few months, officials have said.

The police coordinators who attended Monday’s session left with stacks of red plastic kits, which contained two vials of naloxone — the generic name for the antidote, which blocks heroin from binding to brain receptors — as well as disposable nasal spray devices, a set of rubber gloves and a face mask for administering CPR.

Some of the towns represented have reported dramatic increases in heroin overdoses in recent years. “It used to be a few a year, now it’s a few a month,” said Sgt. Mike Blondin, the Narcan coordinator for the Mahwah Police Department. “Unfortunately, I don’t think it will be long before we have to use one,” he said of the kits.

See DRUGS Page 1-6

He said that he planned to train the rest of the department as soon as he got back to headquarters, and that he expected patrols to use the kits within the next week.

The training session was held at the Bergen County Law and Public Safety Institute in Mahwah and was led by Marc Dreier, director of the mobile intensive care unit at The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, which has agreed to provide training for all law-enforcement and emergency-services personnel in the county. The Prosecutor’s Office paid for the initial supply of 325 Narcan kits, which cost roughly $25 each. It is not clear if Narcan is used or expire, officials said.

Signs of an opioid overdose include loss of consciousness, depressed breathing and “pinpoint” pupils, Dreier told officers. Narcan is broadly effective and has practically no negative side effects, he said, but all overdose victims must be taken to the emergency room.

“Refusal of medical assistance is not an option,” he said.

The antidote is safe to use on children as young as 2 years old, in case of an accidental overdose, Dreier said. Narcan will not reverse the effects of an overdose of alcohol, anti-anxiety drugs such as Xanax or cocaine. It also must be kept at room temperature.

Ocean and Monmouth counties were the first to authorize local police to carry Narcan kits, as part of a pilot program launched in April. In the first month, Ocean County — which saw more than 100 drug-overdose deaths last year — credited Narcan with 10 overdose “reversals,” according to the Prosecutor’s Office there.

In June, Governor Christie announced a statewide expansion of the pilot program. Passaic County held its first training last week, said Carmen Martino, chief of detectives for the Bergen prosecutor.

Police Officer Claire Follari, the coordinator for Garfield’s department, said the city had “seen its share” of overdoses. “This will be much quicker response time,” Follari said. “It does take a while for an ambulance to get to you.”

Small towns may not have to use Narcan as often, said Police Officer George Melzer, Emerson’s coordinator, “but that makes it the more important to do training,” he said. “Police officers are almost always the first on the scene.”

Towns will be given a certain number of kits in proportion to the number of patrol units out at peak hours. The municipal coordinators are, in turn, responsible for training officers in their departments, and those officers will be asked to fill out an online form each time they use naloxone to help the county keep track of non-fatal overdoses, Martino said. A second training session is scheduled for Aug 20.

Email: obrien@northjersey.com
The Valley Hospital's Dr. Marc Dreier, left, instructing Lyndhurst Officer James Goral, gray shirt, as Valley's Lafe Bush, right, worked with North Arlington Officer Thomas Farrell in Mahwah on Monday.