

# In Simi Valley, DEA Acting Administrator Robert Patterson says opioid woes to worsen

[Tom Kisken](#)

A drug summit in Simi Valley focused on prescription drugs, heroin and other opioids. TOM KISKEN/THE STAR

Slowing the flow of opioids made by pharmaceutical companies unintentionally drives demand for street drugs laced with fentanyl that are far more lethal than the original prescription painkillers, the leader of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration said.

Speaking before a drug summit in Simi Valley, DEA Acting Administrator Robert Patterson said demand rises, no matter how deadly the counterfeit pharmaceuticals prove to be.

In some cities, news of overdoses in a particular neighborhood attracts more buyers because they're convinced that if drugs can kill, they must be "good stuff," he said.

"We have an addicted population that still seeks narcotics," said Patterson, appointed as the nation's top drug cop in October by U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions. "This is where all of us have to work together."

Thursday's drug summit, organized by local and federal organizations, brought 750 people to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum. Groups such as Narcotics Anonymous, Ventura County Behavioral Health, the Simi Valley Police Department and the nonprofit Not One More filled the back of the auditorium with displays of opioids ranging from heroin to OxyContin offset by photos of young adults who died from overdoses.

## More news about opioids:

- [Ventura County hospitals scramble to deal with shortage of morphine, other opioids](#)
- [L.A. sues opioid makers amid addiction crisis](#)
- [Ventura County's opioid fix: 'I crave it all the time'](#)

In Ventura County, opioid-involved deaths rose from 55 in 2016 to 92 last year, with fatalities involving heroin and fentanyl both increasing. Nationally, deaths involving synthetic opioids like fentanyl more than doubled in 2016.

The epidemic will likely grow before it improves, Patterson told the crowd.

“As we’re seeing certain things get better, I can assure you other things are going to get worse,” he said. “And we live in a society right now where everybody just wants things fixed. And we all want to hold someone accountable for it not getting done today, and it’s not that kind of problem.”



Next Slide

## 10 Photos

This Simi summit focused on tackling the opioid crisis

Patterson said the addictions hit people regardless of income, race and age. The problem is everywhere, he said, but is worse on the East Coast than in parts of California.

Still, Simi Valley Police Chief David Livingstone described street sales operations where users call sellers on cellphones and place an order that is delivered to their door.

“Once we close one down, there’s another to take its place,” he said.

Drug-related issues crop up every day in the emergency room at Adventist Health Simi Valley, said Julia Feig, director of emergency services at the hospital. Sometimes, people run in the door seeking help for a friend who has overdosed.

“We’ve had cases where they just sort of toss them out the (car) door and off they go because they don’t want to get caught,” she said.

“We treat those (doctors) just like dope dealers on the corner,”

**Daniel C. Comeaux,**  
**DEA associate special agent in charge, Los Angeles**

The DEA operates an office out of Ventura County and is forming a task force involving federal and local law enforcement.

“One of our missions is to put people in jail,” said Daniel C. Comeaux, associate special agent in charge for the DEA in Los Angeles. He said one target is doctors who over-prescribe painkillers in pursuit of money.

“We treat those (doctors) just like dope dealers on the corner,” he said.

The power the drugs hold over people can’t be overestimated, said Nicholas Petrov, of Simi Valley. He’s a recovering addict who like many others started

with prescription drugs and ended up injecting heroin into his body through any portal he could find.

“It takes you to a point where you’re going to do absolutely anything that there is to get your hands on that drug,” he said, later referencing a documentary in which addicts talked about the power of an addiction that becomes less about getting high and more about not getting sick.

“It wasn’t a trigger but it’s kind of a flashback,” he said of the film, [“Chasing the Dragon.”](#)

Nancy Chappell’s son followed the path, too — from marijuana to prescription painkillers to heroin. He died from an overdose three years ago. He was 21.

When references were made at the forum about how aspects of the epidemic may have been unintentional, Chappell asserted that pharmaceutical companies were anything but innocent in how they pushed opioid painkillers.

“I’m very, very mad about that,” she said.

The city of Los Angeles filed a lawsuit against pharmaceutical manufacturers and distributors Thursday over the opioid crisis. The Ventura County government is also exploring the possibility of litigation, with the possibility of a decision this summer.

Before the summit, Patterson noted that lawsuits have been filed across the nation against pharmaceutical companies.

“They’re part of this issue and at some point they will be held accountable,” he said, also noting that movements to shut down production have unintended consequences such as contributing to shortages of medically needed painkillers.

“Our goal is a lot less about punishing Big Pharma than in keeping them in

compliance,” he said of the DEA.

In the summit, Patterson stressed that the way to fight the epidemic is to hold hard, honest community-wide discussions involving many different voices. That’s the way the understanding of the crisis and developing efforts to counter it grow, he said.

“This is the solution,” said Feig, referring to the summit. “I think people educating themselves is a solution.”

From the California Department of Public Health and its Opioid Overdose Surveillance Dashboard, here are some numbers on the state's opioid problem. Steve Byerly