

Unenviable rank: county seventh in state in 'drug babies'

JOEL ADDINGTON
MANAGING EDITOR
reporter@bakercountypress.com

Last spring the Florida Department of Health released a report showing that Baker County ranked seventh out of Florida's 67 counties when it comes to babies born after exposure to illicit drugs in the womb.


Such infants often have immediate symptoms of drug withdrawal early in life and developmental problems as they mature.

But Baker County is not alone. Bradford, Union, Putnam and Nassau counties are also among the top 10 counties in the state for the prevalence of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS), according to the review of birth records from 2011-13. NAS is a condition experienced by newborns exposed to opioid drugs, like Oxycodone or heroin, before birth.

Health officials say NAS may be more common in rural areas due to their isolated nature compared to more urban areas that have better access to substance abuse and mental health treatment facilities and services.

"This isolation could also lead to fewer activities and entertainment, leading youth to drugs as entertainment," said Jennifer Gornto, executive director of the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition, which is part of a working group of hospitals, local health departments and substance abuse prevention organizations that began meeting in April on this issue.

The Florida Department of Health (FDOH) study was part of the state's effort to reduce prescription drug abuse by



County	Frequency (number of NAS births)	Rate (NAS births per 10,000 live births)
Baker	19	185.9
Duval	450	121.7
Bradford	29	307
Union	10	189
Nassau	44	197.5

Source: Florida Department of Health

cracking down on doctors and clinics over-prescribing medications as well as patients who engaged "doctor shopping" to obtain multiple prescriptions for otherwise illicit drugs. An online database of pharmacy records was created so doctors could check patients' medication histories before deciding whether or not to write a new prescription.

Populating the database with prescription information is voluntary for physicians and pharmacists, but the state reported a usage rate more than 60 percent last year, up from about half that the year prior.

The state began combating the rise in prescription drug abuse back in 2009 after noting a three-fold jump in NAS rates statewide since 2000. By 2011, the NAS rate had more than doubled.

Infants born with NAS, which is treatable, may manifest drug withdrawal symptoms like excessive high-pitched crying, irritability, sleeping pattern disturbances, feeding dif-

ficulties or gastrointestinal problems, usually one to three days after delivery.

These infants can remain in a hospital neonatal intensive care unit for weeks after delivery while racking up medical bills as high as \$60,000 by some estimates. Those costs are typically covered by Medicaid.

By 2013 the state legislature formed a task force on prescription drug abuse and newborns to examine the current system for monitoring NAS cases and measure prevalence rates, resulting in the 2015 report.

The study found that statewide the rates of NAS rose just slightly between 2011-13 from 66.7 to 69.2, which researchers concluded to be statistically insignificant and could mean the state's interdiction efforts in previous years has helped level off NAS rates.

That's the conclusion reached in a report from the Florida Attorney General's office, touting more than 3700 prescription pill-related arrests since 2011, including 67

doctors and the seizure of more than 850,000 pills, 121 vehicles, 538 weapons and more than \$10 million. Declines were also seen during the same period in prescription drug-related deaths, including a 52 percent drop in Oxycodone deaths, the report states.

The FDOH study also looked at the demographic characteristics of the NAS babies.

They revealed that most of the NAS babies in Florida were born to white mothers in their late 20s who lacked a high school diploma. Geographically, the areas with the highest NAS rates tended to be located north of Interstate 4 and along Interstate 75.

Ms. Gornto of the Healthy Start Coalition said women in these areas addicted to opiates may not be identified by doctors or authorities early in pregnancy or sooner, and diverted to treatment programs. By the time the infants are born, it's too late, she said.

Other public health and social service officials said the comparatively low-income lev-

els and lack of jobs in rural areas contribute to the high rate of drug abuse and in turn babies born addicted or exposed to illegal drugs. And yet others pointed to undiagnosed mental health issues, including post traumatic stress disorder or depression, that may lead to substance abuse and eventually NAS. Substance abusers may also resist seeking treatment because they fear intervention by police.

County health department director Kerry Dunlavey said it's something her staff often hears. "We try to help them as much as possible. We always tell them 'we are not law enforcement,'" she said.

The state, as part of its response to prescription drug abuse epidemic, set up a help line for anyone dealing with substance abuse issues. By calling 1-800-945-1355, addicts can get counseling and referrals to treatment centers

or other resources. The line is open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. but messages are returned.

Better screening of pregnant women for substance use and abuse would help too, said Ms. Gornto, as would better education of patients on the addictive properties of opioids.

She said early interventions like talking with young women before they become pregnant about the health risks of opioid use for both mothers and babies is needed along with treatment for moms of NAS babies to ensure they discontinue their drug use prior to their next pregnancy.

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BAKER COUNTY COMMISSION

Will study four health plans

MIKE ANDERSON
PRESS STAFF

County commissioners are reviewing multiple health insurance proposals from four different companies offering savings up to 20 percent or more below current costs. The trade-off for lower premiums, of course, is reduced benefits.

The options were presented to the board by insurance consultants Tim and Wendy Owen during a workshop the afternoon of June 2. In addition to the county's current insurance provider, United Healthcare, offers also came from Aetna, AvMed and Florida Blue.

"We have competitive carriers here," Mrs. Owen told the board as she began a lengthy presentation on the various options on the table.

After discussing the insurance issues for nearly two hours the board agreed to send the various proposals back to an employee insurance committee for further review and a request to report back to the commission with a recommendation, possibly at the next meeting on June 16.

County Manager C.J. Thompson said he would like to have a new insurance contract adopted in July and open enrollment for employees starting in August for fiscal year 2015-16.

Each of the various insurance proposals comes with its own unique list of health care providers, prescription drug plans, deductibles, co-pays and other variables, all of which must be weighed against the total premiums to be paid.

United Healthcare offered one plan with a 16.8 percent rate reduction, while one AvMed proposal contained a 20.5 percent cost decrease and another from Florida Blue offered a 18.9 percent rate cut.

Aetna, which was the only carrier that did not include Ed Fraser Memorial Hospital in Macclenny in its network of providers, called for a 5.7 percent cut in one option and an additional 3 percent discount

by eliminating Mayo Clinic from its network.

Mrs. Owen said the top three hospitals used by Baker County employees in the past year were St. Vincent's, Baptist and Fraser, "in that order." Only six went to Mayo Clinic seeking medical care, she said.

Jeffrey Cox, a member of the county's insurance committee, suggested doing away with Mayo Clinic to save money since such a small number of employees used the facility last year.

"Everybody we hire is choosing individual coverage, whereas more would choose family coverage if it was more affordable," said Mr. Cox, finance manager for Baker Correctional Development Corporation, which owns the building housing the sheriff's office and jail in Macclenny.

Of 270 eligible employees, 236 presently are included in the county's health insurance program, including 134 in the sheriff's office.

The present United Healthcare plan only offers two types of coverage: one for individual employees and another for employees with families — whether the employee has any children at home or not.

The options now under consideration include possibly adding two additional tiers: one for employees with a spouse only and one for employees with children only.

The decision to seek offers from other health insurance carriers came last month after United Healthcare offered to renew the current contract with no change in benefits at a modest 5 percent decrease in premiums.

The total annual premium for county employees and their families is \$2,706,287, of which the county pays the greatest portion: 89.6 percent for individual employees and 74.6 percent for family coverage. Of the \$548.72 monthly premium for single coverage and \$1,508.98 for family coverage employees pay only \$56.92 and \$383.14,

respectively.

Commissioners had been expecting a much more generous rate cut from United Healthcare based on comments made by Mr. Owen in February when he said Baker County had a very low medical loss ratio, which he said would make the county most attractive to health insurers seeking the county's business.

If a company pays claims totaling half the premiums collected in a year the loss ratio is 50 percent, which is considered extremely low in the health insurance industry. The loss ratio in Baker County's health plan last year was about 52 percent compared with a statewide average of 80-85 percent, Mr. Owen told county officials in February.

At a board meeting on May 19, Commissioner James Bennett described Mr. Owen's appearance four months ago as a "dog and pony show" and expressed disappointment in the 5 percent savings offered.

But options offered by the four insurance companies last week to make much bigger premium cuts of nearly 20 percent or more, Commissioner Bennett said, could pose a financial hardship on many county employees because the annual deductible amount would be raised to \$12,700 for families.

"That would be a hard stretch for most employees," he said. "They don't make enough (money)."

Commissioner Bennett said he would prefer a 20 percent rate cut and a maximum annual deductible of \$6,350.

Commissioner Jimmy Anderson agreed with Mr. Bennett that a deductible of \$12,000 or more a year "would be devastating" to employees.

At one point in the discussion Mrs. Owen said the county could let employees choose the type of coverage they want from an assortment of options that would suit their needs.

"If they want a richer plan they could pay the cost difference," she said.

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