

# Jack Thorp

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **DISTRICT ATTORNEY JACK THORP ANNOUNCES NEW PLAN TO TRACK DOWN DRUG TRAFFICKERS AND REDUCE THE NUMBER OF OVERDOSE DEATHS**

“Deaths from drug overdoses are skyrocketing,” says District 27 District Attorney Jack Thorp. “It is crucial that we track down those responsible and hold them accountable for the spread of this poison. If you are purchasing illegal controlled dangerous substances on the street, there is a very high probability it has Fentanyl in it.”

According to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 178 overdose deaths in Oklahoma in 1999. That number increased to 478 in 2005. And in 2020, there were nearly 800 overdose deaths.<sup>1</sup>

From the start of 2020 through February of 2022, more than 70 families in District 27 lost loved ones in drug-related deaths.

A leading cause for the increased mortality rate is the growing prevalence of Fentanyl, which the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency describes as “a synthetic opioid that is 80-100 times stronger than morphine.”<sup>2</sup>

“Everything is Fentanyl now,” says Dr. Jason Ballew, a drug addiction specialist. “The heroin is Fentanyl. The Xanax that’s out on the streets is Fentanyl. The Adderall is Fentanyl. The Methamphetamine has Fentanyl in it. The cocaine has Fentanyl in it.”

“It is my mission to eradicate Fentanyl from District 27,” Thorp declared.

Thorp has announced a new law enforcement initiative aimed at finding drug traffickers and stemming the flow of illegal drugs into Adair, Cherokee, Sequoyah, and Wagoner Counties.

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<sup>1</sup> Information from the CDC can be found at [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/drug\\_poisoning\\_mortality/drug\\_poisoning.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/drug_poisoning_mortality/drug_poisoning.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Information from the DEA can be found at <https://www.dea.gov/factsheets/fentanyl>.

“This new initiative will be a partnership between first responders, local law enforcement, public health employees, District 27 Drug Task Force agents, and prosecutors,” says Thorp. “Overdose deaths will not be viewed as accidental deaths. Those scenes will be investigated as thoroughly as other crime scenes, in order to gather the available evidence and follow that evidence to those responsible.”

The Drug Task Force will be working alongside local law enforcement to investigate overdose deaths.

“With the smaller agencies, manpower is a hard thing and sometimes, if the officers aren’t around it a lot, it’s not recognized as an overdose,” says District 27 Drug Task Force Investigator Travis Saulsberry. “These departments call us so we can come help with the investigation and start working it back to the source.”

“A lot of it is going to be training and education for our first responders – firefighters, law enforcement, EMS – to recognize that and treat it as a criminal investigation from the start,” explains Saulsberry. “When officers just take it as an overdose, we lose crucial evidence when they let the M.E. take the body and we don’t collect any evidence or take any photographs, or seize cellphones. So we lose all that evidence from the start, which makes it near impossible months later when we get the M.E. report.”

Dr. Ballew, who worked for 12 years in the emergency department of Northeastern Health System in Tahlequah and is board certified in addiction medicine, says it is critical that all those involved in the process have a strong working relationship.

“It has to be tightly integrated,” states Ballew. “It doesn’t work otherwise.”

Ballew and his wife, Dr. Jennifer Mathis, are in the process of opening a clinic in Tahlequah to treat drug addiction. They believe both treatment and prosecution have important roles to play in fighting this spread of deadly illegal drugs.

“A lot of people that are small-time dealers that are really just supporting their habits, are often victims as well and aren’t always aware that those drugs are laced with Fentanyl,” Ballew explains, “but when you’re talking about the people that are trafficking in large quantities, you know, bringing Fentanyl in from Mexico and making money off of stuff like that, I feel strongly that they should be prosecuted for that because they are willfully doing harm.”

“A huge number of overdose deaths in Oklahoma this last couple of years is the combination of Methamphetamine and Fentanyl,” says Mathis, who is also board certified in addiction medicine. “A lot of people who are taking Methamphetamine don’t necessarily know that there’s Fentanyl in it.”

“The thing about it is when they mix it with heroin or another drug, they stir it around, mix it up, but it doesn’t mix evenly,” says Saulsberry. “In one dose you may have a minor amount or no Fentanyl but in the next you may have the majority of the Fentanyl.”

Saulsberry says this new initiative will take time and hard work but believes the effort will be worth it.

“I have high hopes for this and Jack (Thorp) is excited about it,” says Saulsberry. “The biggest thing is going to be getting all the departments on board for the training and working together at the scene to fight the overdoses and the drugs coming into our community.”

“I believe that with everyone working together on this we can track down those engaged in drug trafficking and hold them accountable for the deaths they cause,” says Thorp. “We can get justice for their victims and those in our community who have lost loved ones. We can also reduce the number of people killed each year by illegal drugs.”

As part of this program, District 27 will be more proactive in educating the public regarding this influx of Fentanyl and its use as a cutting agent for drugs like methamphetamine and heroin. “Hopefully, with the communities’ help, those individuals who use these drugs, or are tempted to try them for the first time, will learn that there is truly a documented danger of dying from ingesting these dangerous substances. I will need everyone’s help in spreading this message,” says Thorp.