

Knowledge of policy might have averted drug drop box debate in Wallingford

Published: March 31, 2015 | Last Modified: March 31, 2015 11:23AM

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WALLINGFORD — Former Police Chief Douglas Dortenzio and Mayor William W. Dickinson Jr. refused to allow a prescription drug drop box in 2013 due to concerns about costs and security, but news last week that the police department already has a longstanding policy of accepting unwanted drugs at the front desk came as a surprise to the mayor.

“What the desk is able to do was never presented as a question,” Dickinson said Monday. “... I don’t have working knowledge of the policies at the desk.”

The department policy was never brought up during past conversations with the Coalition for a Better Wallingford because Dickinson was unaware of it, he said. The coalition, which seeks to combat drug overdoses, pushed for a drop box in the police station lobby, but Dickinson had concerns.

“The issue was putting a box there and the concern with the box was to avoid unidentified items being put inside a box,” Dickinson said. He said he prefers the policy that allows officers to identify what is being brought in.

Police Chief William Wright met with Coalition for a Better Wallingford founder Ken Welch last week to discuss the drop box issue, as well as equipping officers with Narcan. A box won’t be installed in the lobby because the department policy allows residents to turn over the unwanted prescriptions to police officers.

After being turned over at the front desk of the police station, the prescription drugs are put into a “locked location,” said Wright, who took over as chief in February after Dortenzio retired. Once the department has permission from the state, he added, the prescription drugs are taken to the Covanta trash plant on South Cherry Street and burned.

Because Covanta will soon operate as a transfer station, Wright said, the town will have to take the prescription drugs to another burn plant, possibly in Bristol.

While Dickinson did not recall a discussion about the policy, Wright said he could not speak for Dortenzio about why the policy wasn’t publicized.

Dortenzio could not be reached for comment Monday.

The drop box question became a source of heated debate in 2013 after a series of drug overdose deaths in town. Wright said he was unsure if providing the coalition with more information would have eased concerns.

“There was a lot of emotion attached to this issue,” he said.

Welch, however, questioned why the policy was never brought up during past conversations because if the coalition was made aware of it the issue could have ended a year ago.

“Any reasonable person would assume that had we known this it wouldn’t be much of an issue,” Welch said. “But I can’t speak to the motivation behind that.”

Welch said he’s glad Wright told him about the policy. The coalition, he added, will work to raise awareness about the policy. The town will also continue participating in the Drug Enforcement Administration’s biannual National Drug Take-Back initiative, which takes place in April and October.

“From day one when this became an issue, we wish it hadn’t; it’s become a symbolic issue rather than real,” Welch said. “We can accomplish a lot of good letting this happen. It’s a small piece of a big puzzle and the big message here is the cooperation with everyone to do the right thing.”

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