

# South Lake Tahoe becoming a mecca for heroin users

**Publisher's note:** *This is the first of two stories about heroin use on the South Shore.*

**By Jessie Marchesseau**

South Lake Tahoe has seen its first heroin-related death for 2012, and if 2011 is any indication, it will not be the last.

The victim, a 31-year-old female, was found in a South Lake Tahoe hotel room on Feb. 2, and was transported to Barton Memorial Hospital where she later died. She showed evidence of being a long-term drug user and had a history of drug-related charges. Toxicology reports are still pending, but El Dorado County sheriff's Lt. Les Lovell and Detective Matt Harwood, coroner investigator for South Lake Tahoe, say it is an obvious heroin overdose.



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Just four days later, another opiate-related death occurred, this one, an overdose of prescription pain medication.

In 2011, the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department recorded nine opiate-related deaths in South Lake Tahoe. That is a significant number for a city with a population of less than 25,000. In fact, Rich Barna, executive director at Tahoe Turning Point, an outpatient counseling and rehabilitation center, says South Lake Tahoe has a higher per capita population of heroin users than some major cities.

The reason for this is unclear. What is clear, however, is that there have been an alarming spike in heroin arrests and seizures in the South Lake Tahoe area during the last 12 months.

The South Lake El Dorado Narcotics Enforcement Team seized 239 grams of heroin in 2011. This is up from 6.2 grams in 2010 and 21.8 grams in 2009. That is more than a 1,000 percent increase in just two years.

Halfway through 2011, South Lake Tahoe was ranked the No. 1 location for heroin seizures in the Eastern California District. The final numbers for 2011 are not in yet.

"We are almost constantly filing cases for use, possession and sale of heroin," Hans Uthe, El Dorado County deputy district attorney in the South Tahoe office, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

While Barna believes it is not so much an increase in heroin usage as it is in people getting caught, Lovell and SLEDNET task force agent Brandon Auxier are convinced otherwise.

"What we see historically is we see drugs come and go," Lovell said, "... and heroin's one of those that comes and goes."

Lovell and Auxier attribute heroin's current popularity to a difficulty in obtaining OxyContin. Also called Hillbilly Heroin, OxyContin is a fairly common prescription painkiller. Both drugs are opiates, both are extremely addictive. But at \$25 for a single dose, heroin has a much more attractive price tag than OxyContin, which runs about \$80 per pill. Heroin is also much more accessible than the prescription drug.

Counselors at Tahoe Turning Point say switching from prescription painkillers to street drugs such as heroin is a common progression. This is why heroin users can be found at any age, from all walks of life and with varying backgrounds. It is also why authorities are seeing an increase in heroin use among teens. What starts with painkillers for a sports injury or from raiding mom and dad's medicine cabinet can progress to heroin usage.

But the transition from one drug to the other is not always easy.

"People don't realize how easy it is to overdose," Harwood said.

As a coroner investigator, Harwood said he has seen a definite

increase in heroin- and opiate-related deaths compared to five or six years ago. And with two already on the books, 2012 is shaping up to be a killer year.

“It’s unfortunate that we have so many people addicted to it,” he said.

This increase in heroin usage brings with it an increase in people trying to kick the habit. Tahoe Turning Point has experienced an obvious increase in patients seeking treatment for heroin since last summer.

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**Note:** On Feb. 18, *Lake Tahoe News* will share Josh’s story; from his heroin-induced downward spiral to his journey up the road to recovery.