As an opioid epidemic tightens its grip on towns, cities, counties and states across the country, one Florida law enforcement agency is turning to tech to try to stem the tide locally and prevent the rise of heroin overdoses.

Earlier this year, Collier County Sheriff’s Office started using software to track fatal and non-fatal heroin overdoses in the county.

The goal is to create a real-time hot-spot map that shows first responders where the drug overdoses are occurring.

Nationwide, more than 145 agencies currently use the mapping program, but Collier County is the first in Florida.

The Naples Daily News reports the map will help deputies spot trends faster — like tainted drugs flooding certain areas.
Shootings by Palm Beach County sheriff’s deputies are costing taxpayers more money, with the tally reaching $6 million since the start of 2016, according to a Sun Sentinel review.

In the past 18 months, five cases have been settled for more than $300,000, the previous highest payout for such claims since 2000.

Two pending cases could push the total even higher:

— In February 2016, a federal jury awarded $23.1 million to Dontrell Stephens, 24, which was subsequently reduced to $22.4 million. Stephens was paralyzed in a 2013 shooting, when a deputy stopped him for bicycle infraction and mistook his cellphone for a gun. That case is under appeal, and the state Legislature would have to approve a payout above $200,000.

— A lawsuit filed last month accuses the agency of shooting and killing Ricky Whidden, 46, on Dec. 31 in Loxahatchee Groves as he ran away from a deputy during a mental-health crisis. Officials say Whidden had a knife and was threatening deputies, but footage captured by a neighbor’s security camera appears to show him running away.

Teri Barbera, a sheriff’s spokeswoman, did not respond to questions from the Sun Sentinel. In the past, officials have declined to discuss legal settlements, while noting they are not an admission of wrongdoing and are made in the best interest of taxpayers.

Attorney Stuart Kaplan, who represents Whidden’s family, is citing previous lawsuits filed against the department to argue Sheriff Ric Bradshaw has created a culture of excessive force, a claim that has been dismissed in the past by federal judges.

Six of the eight cases settled by the office since the start of 2016 involved people with a mental illness or a developmental disorder who were killed or wounded by deputies.

"They have a warrior type of mentality where they shoot and kill first and ask questions later,” Kaplan said. “I think we need to get away from this warrior mentality. Being in mental distress is not a crime."

Last year, the Sheriff’s Office settled the fatal shooting of an 18-year-old West Boynton man with autism who threw lava rocks at a deputy for $1.7 million.

Another case resolved for $562,500 accused a deputy of using excessive force when he shot and killed a 28-year-old West Boca man who held a screwdriver during a mental-health crisis.

John Kazanjian, president of the union that represents deputies, said the growing settlement amounts have nothing to do with improper training.
Instead, the payouts reflect the legal realities of a public growing increasingly cynical toward the police, he said.

“I really think the sheriff is wary about juries right now,” Kazanjian said. “You can see what the atmosphere is nationwide toward police officers.”

Seth Adams case: State Attorney denies request to reopen probe into fatal 2012 shooting by deputy

So far, federal judges have dismissed allegations that the Sheriff’s Office has a systemic culture of excessive force.

To succeed, someone suing the agency “must demonstrate that the deputies' misconduct in using excessive force was so persistent and widespread in the department as to practically have the force of an official policy,” federal Judge Daniel Hurley wrote in a January 2016 opinion.

That standard had not been met, he wrote.

It’s extremely difficult to prove such allegations in court “unless there is some smoking-gun policy,” said Michelle Jacobs, a professor of law at the University of Florida.

Making comparisons to show one department uses much more force than another is difficult, too, because until recently, departments didn’t have to provide any information on police shootings to federal agencies, she said.

“They just don’t have good data on when police kill,” Jacobs said.

Through public records requests, the Tampa Bay Times compiled a database of police shooting cases from 2009-2014.

The Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office shot 45 people during that time period, compared with 34 people shot by the Broward Sheriff’s Office and 86 people shot by the Miami-Dade Police Department, according to the database.

While pursuing claims in civil courts, families have demanded officers face charges in criminal court as well.

Criminal charges for police officers and deputies involved in on-duty killings are extremely rare in Palm Beach County and across the nation.

Until last year an officer hadn’t faced criminal charges for an on-duty shooting in Palm Beach County since 1993.

Manslaughter and attempted murder charges were filed last year against Nouman Raja, now a former Palm Beach Gardens officer, who’s accused of "grossly negligent" conduct in the killing of Corey Jones, 31.

Jones was shot while stranded on I-95 because of a broken-down car.
In a separate case, a Broward County grand jury indicted a deputy in an on-duty shooting in December 2015 — the first such charges since 1980. A judge later dismissed the charges, and the case is being appealed.

Officers also almost never pay civil damages out of their own pockets, according to research by the University of California, Los Angeles. Researchers found that only 0.02 percent of money paid in police shooting settlements nationwide over a six-year span came directly from officers.

Attorneys for man who won $22.4 million jury award fight to seize deputy's wages
Sgt. Adams Lin, the deputy who shot and paralyzed Stephens in the case that netted a $22.4 million jury verdict, had his car, clothes and furniture hauled away to help satisfy the debt he owed to the man he shot.

But a federal magistrate ordered the property be returned and barred any future seizures at his house.

Typically, settlement money either comes from the budgets of law enforcement agencies or through an insurance policy, according to UCLA’s research. Barbera did not respond to a question asking how the Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office handles settlements.

From 2000 until the start of 2016, the largest settlement made in a case involving a person shot by a Palm Beach County deputy was $300,000, according to the Sun Sentinel’s review.

That case involved the 2008 killing of Marino Ramos, a 35-year-old migrant construction worker. Investigators suspected Deputy Samuel Peixoto, 38, cut himself to make it appear he had been attacked. The deputy killed himself as criminal charges loomed.

An 2015 analysis by The Palm Beach Post found the Sheriff’s Office had only paid out $1.7 million since 2000 to people who had been shot or their families. The $6.2 million in settlements since the start of 2016 is more than three times greater than that amount.

Bradshaw, who was elected to his fourth term in August, has made some reforms as he’s moved to settle cases, while resisting others.

In an interview with the Sun Sentinel before the election, Bradshaw said he created a specialized unit that pairs mental health professionals with deputies trained for such encounters.

Seth Adams' family settles for $2.5 million with sheriff's office in fatal shooting
Earlier this year, he signed an agreement that allows for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to investigate deputy shootings, instead of using investigators from within the same department.

But Bradshaw hasn’t responded to calls from county commissioners to equip deputies with body cameras. He also dismissed requests to establish a citizens review committee, which would give civilians more oversight. He’s promoted at least one deputy involved in a controversial shooting.

In other high-profile police shooting cases, North Charleston, S.C., paid $6.5 million to the family of Walter Scott, an unarmed man who was shot as he ran from police.
Cleveland agreed to pay $6 million to the family of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old who was shot and killed while holding a pellet gun. The family of Philando Castile, a Minnesota man shot and killed during a traffic stop, received $3 million.

It’s far from certain whether civil payouts will alter policing tactics and transparency, Jacobs said. Almost all the agreements stipulate officers did nothing wrong, she said.

“I think at a lot of places it is seen as the cost of doing businesses,” Jacobs said.
Nothing is easy for the civility-challenged Hallandale Beach City Commission.

Even the simple task of scheduling a special election seems beyond them.

Divided into two factions that agree on almost nothing and are often downright nasty, commissioners are on the verge of violating their own city laws governing special elections.

But in this snafu, commissioners are not blaming one another for a change.

Commissioners are pointing fingers at Elections Supervisor Brenda Snipes. She says it is not her fault.

What the two sides agree upon is that the process is bogged down in a morass of various state and city election laws.

Commissioner Anthony Sanders resigned on August 11 amid corruption allegations. A Hallandale Beach city law requires a special election no more than 90 days of a vacancy.

As of today, seven days have passed.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

The clock is running and Hallandale Beach commissioners have reached a final decision on... nothing.

The two sides continue to negotiate over a date.

“We are trying to meet their needs,” Snipes said.

One snag:

State law requires that some absentee ballots be in the mail 45 days before an election, according to Snipes.

That provision would require Hallandale Beach to formally schedule an election, hold a qualifying period and send Snipes the final ballot. Then the ballot must be printed and approved.

None of these steps have been taken yet.

There are also laws governing the advertising of a special election, how many times the ads must run and the length of the candidate qualifying period.

The situation has also aggravated by Snipes.
She ordered new voting machines and retired many of the old ones, hampering her ability to hold a special election.

The new machines have internal modems and are designed to speed the counting of election results. In the future, ballots would not have to be delivered to central locations for counting.

But before the new machines can be used, the staff must be trained and each machine tested.

That takes time. Time is what Hallandale Beach doesn’t have under its own laws.

The new machines were ordered for delivery at this time because no election was scheduled. They are not supposed to be ready until after January 1, Snipes said.

“We didn’t expect this election,” Snipes said.

Snipes says she did prepare for the Fort Lauderdale primary in February because it was scheduled.

The Elections Office offered to hold the election the first week in November. The city doesn’t believe those dates would meet the requirements of Hallandale Beach laws governing advertising and advance notice of an election.

Another date Snipes offered Hallandale Beach is March 13, when there are municipal election in several cities. Hallandale Beach would have an incentive for picking that date because the election costs would be shared with the other cities on the ballot that date.

Hallandale Beach has so far has rejected the March date, which would violate the 90-day provision of city law.
Hallandale Beach City Commissioner Anabelle Taub has become the victim of credit card fraud and blames her political opponents for playing a part in publicizing her personal information during last year’s bitterly contested commission election.

She made a fraud report July 12 with the Hallandale Beach Police Department. Taub also met with an FBI agent who specializes in identify theft at the agency office in Miramar. She had expressed concern about possible credit card theft when her personal information, including the last four digits of her Social Security number, was publicized.

“My identity has been stolen,” Taub said at the Aug. 2 city commission meeting where she talked about the credit card fraud amounting to nearly $4,000 and her lingering bitterness involving dirty campaign activities.

“I have had to deal with thousands of dollars [in credit card fraud], tracking devices on my car and a P.I. [private investigator] following me around,” Taub added. “I have had to deal with someone who bought a car in my name.”

Among those she singled out for her problems was former City Commissioner Bill Julian, who Taub unseated from the commission in last year’s election.

But “most of all,” Taub stated at the commission meeting, she blamed Mayor Joy Cooper. “I hold Mayor Cooper responsible for what I’m going through. You, Mayor Cooper have done all you can to destroy my life. You are drunk with power.”

Asked why she identified Cooper, Taub referred to a Sun Sentinel editorial, “The Dirtiest Election in Broward County,” published in November 2016. It stated Cooper had sent the newspaper a licensed investigator’s report on Taub that included her Social Security and credit card numbers. The information stated that another person uses Taub’s Social Security number and has two different dates of birth, the editorial stated.

The newspaper editorial said Cooper at first denied having seen or sent such documents. But after the newspaper revealed an email Cooper sent to the Sun Sentinel, Cooper stated, the newspaper said, “I feel like a total idiot. I didn’t remember sending it. I did send it... My bad.”

The mayor did not return calls for comment.

But responding at the Aug. 2 meeting, Cooper said, “I had nothing to do with trackers and private investigators... There was plenty of mud thrown on both sides” in the past election. Cooper did say, however, she had a background check done on Taub to make sure she lived in the city.
Taub, City Commissioner Michelle Lazarow — who defeated former commissioner Alex Lewy and frequent commission candidate Ann Henigson last November — and Commissioner Keith London reported tracking devices on their vehicles during last year’s campaign.

The new majority

The trio has formed a new majority on the commission, taking control from Cooper. Julian, who backed Cooper in previous years, would have allowed the mayor to retain control of the commission if he had been reelected. Commissioner Anthony Sanders generally backed Cooper. However, Sanders recently resigned following a critical investigative report by the Broward Inspector General’s Office.

As for Julian, Taub showed handbills and information published in the Sun Times newspaper, located in Hallandale Beach, which revealed the last four numbers of her Social Security number, questioned where she lived, publicized various addresses and questioned her date of birthday.

“Shame on all of you,” Taub said, referring to those who distributed her personal information, including Julian.

Contacted, Julian said he found information about Taub placed in his mailbox. “It was anonymous,” he said, refusing to answer questions about whether he checked out the information and what part he played in the newspaper advertising and distribution of the handbills.

“I don’t want to talk about last year,” Julian said. “I don’t want to talk about all that stuff.” He also said he didn’t want to talk about a report that he was caught on a recording saying he was promised hundreds of workers by an attorney for a prominent local business group. “That was London trying to kill my election,” Julian said.

Despite the controversy surrounding Julian, he says is considering seeking the commission seat vacated by Sanders, in either a special election or when Sanders’ full term expires in November 2018.

During the hectic election last year and the current fraud activities, Taub said she has been dealing with cancer issues, which has required her to go to a Georgia treatment facility. She said she is cancer free now but is receiving follow-up treatment.

The July 12 report by the Hallandale Beach Police Department stated, “Taub explained she had discovered charges on her CapitalOne Credit Card Account she did not authorize.”

“Taub was able to provide a printout of twenty-four [24] charges she did not authorize,” the report stated. “The purchases on the credit card account ... were in multiple municipalities including Hallandale Beach. The charges in Hallandale Beach were done at Walgreens located at 1300 E. Hallandale Beach Blvd. on 7/6/17 for $69.00 and a vending machine on 7/9/17 for $0.85.”

Taub said the credit card was issued in her name.

Since she filed the report, the list of fraudulent charges has grown to about 135, totaling $3,862.19 – absent the purchase of a car.
MIAMI - The Miami Police Department held a drone training class Friday at Miami Marine Stadium.

"We want to make sure we're ahead of the game," Miami police Lt. Orlando Villaverde said.

Miami Marine Stadium moonlighted as an air park as officers from Davie, Hollywood, the city of Miami and Miami-Dade, Broward and Monroe counties got trained and certified to use unmanned aerial systems.

"These officers and our department have taken the lead going forward, making sure our officers are now certified," Villaverde said.

Villaverde helped teach the federally and state-regulated course.

The lieutenant is a police helicopter pilot, himself, whose choppers seem to be getting much smaller and much cheaper.

"Most police departments have helicopter operations that exceed over $1,000 an hour," Villaverde said. "The Department of Justice reports you can operate unmanned aerial systems at a fraction of the cost -- between $25 and $30 an hour."

Authorities said the crime-fighting potential could be priceless, helping them with surveillance and getting photographs.

"We can map crimes scenes with it, we can look for bad guys (and) we can look for lost people," Hollywood police Lt. Andres Astacio said. "(We can) search areas a lot faster, check for suspects on the roof, for evidence -- so, there's a lot of application for this."

Astacio said his department hopes to put drones into use in the coming months, along with the rest of his band of police pilots.