Press Release

April 11, 2020

Mills Administration Steps Up Support For Maine People With Substance Use Disorder In Response to COVID-19

Actions Reduce Harm, Promote Treatment Access, and Bolster Funds to Providers

AUGUSTA –Governor Mills and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew announced today a series of actions to ensure that Maine people affected by Substance Use Disorder can access critical treatment and resources in the face of COVID-19, including facilitating access to medication and counseling, promoting harm reduction strategies, and accelerating financial relief for providers.

"While physical distancing is our best tool to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, we also have to recognize its impacts on Maine people, like those with Substance Use Disorder, many of whom rely on in-person support for treatment and recovery,"**said Governor Janet Mills**. "My Administration is taking these steps to try to help those with SUD get the support they need during this challenging time."

"We recognize that individuals with Substance Use Disorder who rely on face-to-face treatment and recovery support are at greater risk during this time of physical distancing,"**said Maine Opioid Response Director Gordon Smith.**"But separation doesn't have to mean isolation. We must all join together to maintain Maine's recovery from the opioid epidemic."

"We are working to both prevent and treat Substance Use Disorder during these unprecedented times,"**said DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew.**"I urge all Maine people to reach out to those who are struggling and their families to let them know that help is still available."

Governor Mills has signed an Executive Order that temporarily relaxes restrictions on syringe exchange programs, which are proven harm reduction strategies that open the door to treatment and protect against the spread of infectious diseases. For the duration of the COVID-19 public health emergency,Executive Order 27lifts the requirement that syringe exchange programs collect one syringe for every one delivered, allowing individuals to receive and return syringes on an as-needed basis. Syringe exchange programs may also more easily adjust their hours and, for mobile sites, their locations to best serve their clients.

The American Medical Associationyesterdayurged all states to adopt the Maine Executive Order on syringe exchanges, with its President, Patrice Harris, MD, MA, stating, "Sterile needle and syringe exchange is a proven harm reduction strategy.We commend Governor Mills for her action."

To ensure continued access to essential medication during the COVID-19 pandemic, Maine DHHS is following federal guidance that allows opioid treatment programs greater flexibility to provide take-home doses of methadone. Patients who are determined by the programs' clinicians to be stable and safe to take home additional doses may receive 14- or 28-day supplies. The Board of Pharmacy has also enacted emergency rules, at the Administration's request, to allow the pharmacist in charge at each clinic to oversee preparation of take-home doses by a nurse without being physically present.

Additionally, DHHS has facilitated distribution of naloxone to the opioid treatment programs so patients can have take-home doses due to the potential for overdose. This is part of the Administration's broader work to increase access to naloxone, with 20,000 doses expected to be purchased this month for distribution over the remainder of the year. DHHS is in daily communication with opioid treatment programs and requires them to contact patients receiving take-home doses at least weekly through virtual visits.

The Administration has acted topromote the expansion of telehealth, including for medication-assisted treatment and counseling. Executive Orders have facilitated providers' ability to see patients via telehealth and MaineCare

has authorized and enhanced reimbursement for virtual visits.

MaineCare claims for Substance Use Disorder services provided via telehealth have jumped 30-fold, from an average of approximately 100 weekly claims for the previous six months to more than 3,600 for services provided during the last week in March at last count. These figures are preliminary and are expected to increase as providers continue submitting claims.More than 68,000 people have cumulatively enrolled in MaineCare through the expansion ordered by Governor Mills, withnearly 9,000 receiving Substance Use Disorder treatment.

The Administration is additionally supporting Substance Use Disorder providers financially through MaineCare. DHHS has accelerated rate increases for medication management to April 1, 2020 from July 1, 2020, and made planned rate increases for opioid treatment programs retroactive to July 1, 2019.

The Mills Administration is alsosupportingrecovery centers, recovery residences, and recovery coaches, which are continuing services and training through virtual platforms, and thanks the recovery support organizations hosting hundreds of support meetings virtually.

Free, confidential peer recovery support is available seven days a week, and help is only aphone call or click away.If you, a friend or a family member needs help, resources are also available by calling 211. For more urgent needs, call the state crisis line at 1-888-568-1112.