News

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New Jersey Receives $7.1 Million Federal Grant to Address Overdose Epidemic

August 31 is International Overdose Awareness Day

As the state commemorates International Overdose Awareness Day, New Jersey was awarded $7.1 million in federal funds to connect residents to recovery resources, expand efforts to improve the health and care of those who use drugs and examine root causes of overdose to inform prevention efforts.

This is the second year the Department of Health (NJDOH) received funding through the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Overdose Data to Action Award, a 3-year grant to address drug overdoses. A portion of this funding, $1.31 million, goes to the New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety to continue its Operation Helping Hand program and prevent inappropriate prescribing via the NJ Prescription Monitoring Program.

“This funding comes at a critical time as we are concerned about an increase in overdose deaths that have occurred this spring,” said Health Commissioner Judith M. Persichilli. “On a day dedicated to honoring the lives of so many lost, this investment will continue the fight to deliver services to those who need them and help us to prevent more overdoses and grieving families.”

The funding will advance Murphy Administration’s comprehensive overdose reduction effort, which employs a “money-ball approach” using data to link individuals to treatment and prevent overdose deaths.

“At a time when individuals suffering from addiction are even more alone and vulnerable, the grant money announced today ensures that Operation Helping Hand programs throughout the state will have funding to continue and expand lifeline services to those who desperately need them,” said Attorney General Grewal. “Today, as we remember the lives lost and the families shattered by addiction, we are reminded of the toll the drug crisis is taking on our communities and are more resolute than ever in our commitment to ending it.”

The COVID-19 health emergency has resulted in a constellation of factors that are triggers for increased substance use and overdoses, including grief, social isolation, unemployment, housing instability and increased anxiety. In May, there were more suspected drug-related deaths than in any month (309 deaths) in 2020, 2019, and 2018. Overall, the state has seen a 12.3 percent increase in suspected drug related deaths from January to July 2020 (1,834), when compared to the same time period of last year (1,634).

The first round of CDC funding, combined with Year 2 funding, provides for expansion of Overdose Fatality Review Teams, which allows local health departments to convene local stakeholders to better understand the causes of a fatal overdose and to develop and implement solutions. The award period begins in October.

NJDOH will also continue to invest in the state’s seven Harm Reduction Centers, also known as Syringe Access Programs, which provide access to syringes, prevention supplies, overdose prevention kits and education, naloxone, and HIV and Hepatitis C testing. Through this funding, the centers provide outreach, counseling and care coordination to help vulnerable populations—including LGBTQ youth and homeless individuals—to make safer choices and practice harm reduction to reduce the risk of overdose.

During COVID-19, these centers were declared an essential service and have made significant adjustments to continue operations. In 2020, Harm Reduction Centers have served more than 2,000 clients and made over 1,000 referrals to support services, including treatment and recovery. In the Fall a Department of Health social media campaign will promote the importance of harm reduction centers in the State.

The NJDOH will also expand the “5 Minutes to Help” training initiative for EMS to improve connections to care for non-fatal overdose victims. The program has helped to train responders on interacting with patients following treatment from a suspect opioid overdose, linking patients to resources they need and reducing the number of repeat overdose patients. Last year, more than 100 individuals were trained and more than 600 resource kits were distributed. This year, NJDOH plans to expand the training, focusing on compassion fatigue, harm-reduction trauma-informed care, and reducing stigma around mental health.

With this funding, the Department of Health will continue trauma-informed approaches among healthcare providers, which will improve access to prevention and treatment services. About 80 percent of individuals who struggle with addiction have a history of trauma. The role of trauma is important in light of the mental

health and trauma-related consequences of COVID-19, which are layered on former trauma histories. Last year, the grant focused on promoting trauma informed strategies, focusing on our harm reduction centers. This year that work will focus on the EMS community and other providers.

Year 2 will expand work to promote best practices to address the overdose epidemic among Health Systems and build on the Overdose Reduction Options (ORO) Program, which seeks to reduce opioid prescribing among Emergency Departments and provide alternatives to chronic pain. In its first year, ORO had 11 health systems participate.

The Department will also be working to promote uniform non-punitive neonatal abstinence syndrome guidelines. New Jersey offers pregnant women and parents with opioid and substance use disorder, as well as newborns with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS), supports for treatment and recovery. The Department will work with health systems and providers to support more parents with substance use with the treatment and care they need.

The Department will pass $1.31 million of the grant money to the Department of Law and Public Safety to fund programs and initiatives that advance the fight against the opioid crisis. The vast majority of the funds - $1.1 million - will be used to enhance and expand Operation Helping Hand programs in all 21 counties. These programs help connect individuals with opioid use disorder to necessary treatment. Grant funds will also support the salaries of two Peer-to-Peer Learning Coordinators who will offer law enforcement agencies training in understanding and addressing addiction. The remaining funds will be used to enhance New Jersey's Prescription Monitoring Program (NJ PMP), including efforts to monitor the compliance of licensed health professionals, further integrate PMP data into electronic health records, and implement programs that support coordination of care for at-risk individuals.

"This grant funding strengthens our ability to attack the opioid addiction epidemic on multiple fronts," said Sharon M. Joyce, Director of the Office of the New Jersey Coordinator for Addiction Responses and Enforcement Strategies ("NJ CARES"). "Operation Helping Hand funding promotes programs that help break the cycle of addiction for those already suffering from a substance use disorder. The PMP funding allows us to provide physicians with easier access to information they need to identify and prevent at-risk individuals from starting down the path to addiction, and allows us to enhance programming to more quickly identify and put a stop to indiscriminate prescribing."

CDC funding has supported New Jersey's ability to monitor the overdose epidemic closely, tracking statistics such as drug-related hospital visits, naloxone administration and suspected drug related deaths. This data is shared through the NJ Overdose Data Dashboard, as well as local health department overdose dashboards.

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