Mills Administration Announces "OPTIONS" Initiative to Support Maine People With Substance Use Disorder

October 21, 2020

To combat the disturbing rise in fatal drug overdoses exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Janet Mills today announced a new "OPTIONS" (Overdose Prevention Through Intensive Outreach, Naloxone and Safety) initiative. Under the initiative, mobile response teams in every Maine county will engage with communities that have high rates of drug overdoses to promote drug prevention and harm reduction strategies, connect people directly to recovery services and treatment, and distribute naloxone, the lifesaving overdose Mills Administration Announces "OPTIONS" Initiative to Support Maine People With Substance Use Disordery has resources to prevent substance use disorder and fatal overdoses and create a path toward recovery."

The OPTIONS teams will focus on populations at high risk of overdose, such as those experiencing homelessness, those who have left treatment programs, and those recently released from incarceration. Special efforts will also be made to serve survivors of prior drug overdoses, as leading addiction research indicates that assertive outreach and post-overdose engagement leads to sustained connections to recovery and reduced risk of subsequent overdoses.

> *"Maine people who are struggling with substance use disorder need appropriate treatment, life-saving resources and support," said Dr. Jessica Pollard, Director of the DHHS Office of Behavioral Health. "This initiative will connect them with familiar faces in their communities who know how to help in a moment of crisis and all along the path toward recovery."*

This latest effort in the Mills Administration's response to the opioid epidemic comes as fatal drug overdoses are rising nationally. While fatal overdoses in Maine began to rise prior to COVID-19, they have been exacerbated by the pandemic, which is making it more challenging to connect people with treatment and recovery resources.

A report released today by the Maine Office of the Attorney General determined that 132 Maine people have died from drug overdoses in the second quarter of 2020, representing a 4 percent increase over the first quarter of 2020. In total, 258 Maine people have died from drug overdoses through the first six months of 2020, representing a 27 percent increase over the last two quarters of 2019. Eight percent of the fatal overdoses in 2020 were homeless individuals. In addition to the pandemic, fatal drug overdoses in Maine are also closely linked to the emergence of dangerous and lethal opioids like the synthetic painkiller fentanyl. The Attorney General's report on overdoses indicated nearly two-thirds of overdose deaths this year are attributable to the presence of fentanyl or a fentanyl analog.

> *"The COVID-19 pandemic is a destabilizing and deadly time for persons in recovery across the entire country," said Gordon Smith, Maine's Director of Opioid Response. "We know that we cannot pave the way to recovery if we can't keep people alive. The OPTIONS initiative will provide on the ground, lifesaving*

support in communities across Maine to ensure that people have a chance to seek the help they need to recover from substance use disorder."

The OPTIONS initiative will also include a broad public information campaign aimed at warning about the dangers of fentanyl, encouraging treatment and recovery, reducing the stigma of substance use disorder, and emphasizing the importance of calling 911 immediately during a suspected overdose. This campaign will increase awareness of Maine's "Good Samaritan Law," signed into law by Governor Mills in May 2019, which protects someone experiencing an overdose, or who reports a suspected overdose in good faith, from prosecution for certain drug-related offenses.

The OPTIONS initiative is supported by $2.5 million in existing federal funds, including $500,000 in Coronavirus Relief Funds, through the Maine Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Behavioral Health, and will operate with assistance from the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the Maine Department of Public Safety.

To implement county-level outreach efforts under the OPTIONS initiative, the State is contracting with regional behavioral health providers and recovery centers. These organizations will mobilize response teams in collaboration with local law enforcement, emergency responders, recovery coaches and harm reduction professionals. Services are expected to begin in November.

The OPTIONS initiative builds on a number of measures implemented by the Mills Administration to address Maine's long-standing opioid epidemic, including: increasing access to treatment, opening new recovery centers and residences, training more than 300 new recovery coaches, and providing career training and employment opportunities for individuals adversely affected by the opioid epidemic.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Administration authorized recovery service providers to utilize telehealth services, increased flexibility for take-home doses of the opioid treatment methadone, and provided flexibility to needle exchange programs.

Free, confidential peer recovery support is available seven days a week, and help is only a phone 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.

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