

A Commonwealth Crisis

Combatting Heroin and Opioid Abuse in PA

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Heroin and Opioid Abuse – A Deadly Epidemic

Pennsylvania is in the grips of a drug abuse and overdose epidemic the likes of which has never been seen. Authorities point to the overprescribing of opioid drugs as the cause of many overdoses and addictions, many of which have led to the use of cheap yet powerful heroin. The drugs are becoming stronger, and more widely available, and overdoses and deaths are on the rise.

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According to a recent report by the Drug Enforcement Administration, nearly 3,400 drug-related overdose deaths were reported in Pennsylvania in 2015, an increase of more than 23 percent over 2014. In approximately four out of five of those deaths, the presence of heroin or at least one opioid was reported.

One reason for this increase in heroin use is that addicts are shifting from more costly prescription opioids to cheaper alternatives.

The United States has seen a dramatic increase in opioid prescribing for chronic pain, from 87 million prescriptions in the mid-1990s to 207 million in 2013. Heroin is cheap and is easier to find than prescription opioids, making it one of the fastest growing drugs in Pennsylvania and America.

Nearly half of all young people who inject heroin surveyed in three recent studies reported abusing prescription opioids before starting to use heroin, supporting the research that pain medication may actually open the door to heroin use. The end result is a crisis that affects all Pennsylvanians – a growing and deadly epidemic that must be addressed.

Reversing this trend will require a wide-ranging response involving multiple partners, from improving opioid prescribing practices and expanding access to treatment, to working with law enforcement to disrupt the heroin supply, and increasing the use of medications, such as naloxone, to reverse drug overdoses. Working together, we need to find ways to combat this health care crisis.

Seeking Solutions to the Crisis

In July 2014, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a bipartisan legislative agency, began a series of statewide public hearings to examine the increasing use of heroin and opioids in rural Pennsylvania.

The Center held hearings across the state, received more than 60 hours of testimony, and issued two comprehensive reports that made one thing crystal clear – addiction is a disease and should be treated as such.

The hearings have also resulted in action by the Senate to address this issue, and additional legislative measures will be introduced in the near future. These include laws to:

- Provide legal protection for witnesses or Good Samaritans providing medical help at the scene of an overdose.

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SOBERING STATISTICS

- Nearly 3,400 Pennsylvanians died of a drug overdose in 2015.
- An average of seven Pennsylvanians are dying every day from overdoses – now the leading cause of accidental death.
- One in 10 young adults between ages 18 and 25 have used prescription drugs non-medically in the past year. Between 2009 and 2012, the number of Pennsylvanians who have overdosed on heroin rose 23 percent.
- Approximately 80 percent of heroin addicts can trace their addiction back to prescription opioids.
- Fatal overdoses in Pennsylvania increased 14-fold between 1979 and 2014.
- PA was ninth in the country in drug overdose deaths last year, with heroin the most common drug identified in fatal-overdose victims.
- Pennsylvania leads the nation in the number of drug overdose deaths among young men.
- Drug overdose deaths now surpass car accident deaths in 36 states.



Telephone Town Hall Scheduled for Sept. 21

Our state's legislators, law enforcement officials, public health agencies and educators are working to combat drug availability, address drug treatment and promote drug education. But they need your help and feedback.

At 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, September 21, a Telephone Town Hall will be held from the state Capitol to hear ideas and suggestions from residents about how best to combat this serious epidemic. The event is part of a statewide effort to gather information on how the heroin and opioid epidemic is affecting Pennsylvania and what can be done to save lives and battle addiction.

The panel will be hosted by Senator Gene Yaw, who serves as the chairman of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. He will be joined by experts from across the Commonwealth and other special

guests to answer questions about heroin and opioid addiction and what the Legislature is doing to curb the use of these dangerous drugs.

#ACOMMONWEALTH CRISIS

YOU MAY SIGN UP AHEAD OF TIME at www.acommonwealthcrisis.com/telephone to receive a phone call a few moments before the town hall meeting begins. You can also sign up by texting the keyword "talkheroin" to the number 828282. You can simply listen to the conversation or join in. Audio streaming for the tele-town hall will also be available.

I hope you will join us for this important meeting. Thank you.

Seeking Solutions to the Crisis (cont.)

- Allow naloxone, a synthetic drug that blocks opiate receptors in the nervous system and known as the brand name Narcan, to be prescribed to a third party, such as a friend or family member, and administered by law enforcement and firefighters.
- Establish a Non-narcotic Medication Assisted Substance Abuse Treatment Grant Pilot Program within the Department of Corrections.
- Expand the types of drugs monitored under the state's existing Prescription Drug Monitoring Program to include Schedule II through V controlled substances, and create a Board within the Department of Health to establish and oversee an electronic data system listing.

The Senate also passed and sent to the House Senate Bill 1202 which requires continuing medical education training for prescribers in pain management and dispensing and prescribing practices of opioids.

While Harrisburg will not have all the answers, the legislature can provide valuable resources and mandate changes that will help communities combat heroin and opioids.

A package of bills is currently being considered that would require:

- Labeling on prescription bottles containing opioids to warn of their addictive nature.
- Written consent from parents in order for their children to receive prescription opioids.
- Safe Opioid Prescribing Curriculum in Pennsylvania's medical schools in order to have the most current information on proper opioid prescribing practices.
- Coroners/medical examiners to report the death of any person resulting from a drug overdose.
- Insurance plans to provide access to abuse-deterrent opioid analgesic drugs and apply cost-sharing provisions for these products.
- Mandatory reporting for all heroin and opioid overdoses where Naloxone was administered.
- Implementation of opioid prescribing guidelines developed by the Safe and Effective Prescribing Practices Task Force.
- Limit the prescription for a controlled substance containing an opioid to seven days.



NEW FUNDING AVAILABLE IN STATE BUDGET FOR TREATMENT

One thing has become clear in the fight to stop deaths due to heroin and opioid abuse. We must find ways for addicts to receive treatment that helps them recover. That is a significant challenge because the demand for treatment beds has outpaced funding and resources. Nationally, funding is available to provide help to only one of every 10 people who need treatment. Approximately 80 percent of people who go to the emergency room for an overdose receive no follow-up care, and as a result, many relapse.

Recognizing this critical need, the General Assembly included \$15 million in this year's state budget to combat heroin and opioid addiction, including funds for emergency addiction treatment and behavioral health services. This funding will help open new addiction treatment centers throughout the state, known as Centers for Excellence. It will also allow the state to draw down an additional \$5.4 million in federal funding for an overall total of \$20.4 million to combat opioid abuse.

Money isn't the only answer to this multi-faceted crisis. But ultimately, treatment costs are going to be cheaper than the incarceration costs – and more importantly – they can save lives.