



**Center for Rural Pennsylvania
Public Hearing
Heroin and Opioid Addiction Treatment and Recovery
July 29, 2015**

Good Morning, I am Dr. Rachel Levine, Physician General of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I would like to thank Chairman Yaw, Chairman Wozniak and the members of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors for asking me to join them today. I would also like to thank Dr. Scheinman, of Commonwealth Medical College, for hosting this hearing on his campus. I am pleased to be here to discuss one of the most pressing public health issues in Pennsylvania: the prevalence of opioid addiction, the increase in dependency on opioids and subsequent overdoses of both prescription drug opioids and heroin.

I would like to begin by saying that I applaud the critical role the Pennsylvania Legislature has played in supporting the work of the Department of Health and the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs. Last year the legislature's passage of Act 139 of 2014, a law that expands the availability of the life-saving drug Naloxone, and Act 191 of 2014, which provides for the prescription drug monitoring program, are both important acts to protect the health of our Commonwealth citizens.

As this Board has highlighted, overdose deaths are too high in Pennsylvania. According to the Pennsylvania Coroners' Report on Overdose Death Statistics, over 2400 deaths resulted from drug poisoning in 2014. That is an astonishing average of seven deaths a day and this is most certainly an underestimate of the problem. The report reflects only 54 of the 67 counties and possible lag time in toxicology reports and autopsy reports contribute to under-reporting.

The prevalence of overdose deaths is fueled by an increase in opioid use. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, heroin use more than doubled among young adults ages 18-25 in the past decade and 45% of people who use heroin were also addicted to prescription opioid painkillers. There is increased use among men and women, young people and older Pennsylvanians, and low income and higher income individuals.

The Wolf Administration is greatly concerned by this epidemic. Governor Wolf has called on his Cabinet officials to work together, across departments, to take action to prevent addiction and better treat those who are opioid dependent. I am pleased to join my colleague, Secretary Dallas, today who has been a collaborator in this work and thank the work of my other colleagues, such as Secretary Murphy at Department of Health, Secretary Tennis at Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, Secretary Cortes at Department of State, Secretary Rivera at Department of Education and others who have directed their staff on initiatives to combat this public health epidemic.

The Department of Health is focused on the prevention of opioid addiction and supporting efforts to get dependent users into treatment. I am working with Secretary Tennis and expert stakeholders from the

community on prevention efforts like opioid prescribing guidelines for physicians and prescribers. I am working with our community partners on the creation of continuing education materials to teach health care professionals how they can help combat opioid addiction and overdose. Additionally, I am working closely with Secretary Murphy on the implementation of the Commonwealth's Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, Achieving Better Care by Monitoring All Prescriptions.

All of these prevention efforts are critical to protecting the health of Pennsylvanians. Equally as important is ensuring that those who are opioid dependent can get the treatment they need. I have supported the work of Secretary Tennis to ensure funding for adequate availability of needed treatment facilities. I want to recognize the efforts of the Department of Corrections and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency to provide naltrexone, the brand name Vivitrol, to combat recidivism and I applaud the Department of Human Services for their commitment of \$1.25 million in funds to expand the distribution of naloxone kits.

Naloxone is a medication that can reverse an overdose caused by prescription drug opioids or heroin use and we know the use of naloxone saves lives. When administered during an overdose, either intranasal or intramuscular through an auto-injector, naloxone blocks the effects of opioids on the brain and restores breathing within two to eight minutes. Once the individual is revived and assessed at the hospital by medical professionals they can begin the substance abuse treatment they need. The Delaware County District Attorney credits the use of naloxone for saving 51 individuals since their program began less than a year ago. As reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, increased access to naloxone is essential to stop our citizens from dying at a rate of seven deaths a day.

In April, I signed Standing Order DOH-001-2015 to ensure first responders, such as the Pennsylvania State Police and municipal fire companies, who complete the required training, can carry and administer naloxone to an overdose victim. Additionally, Act 139 of 2014 allows prescribers to write third-party prescriptions to friends and families of opioid users and protects those who administer naloxone to save the life of their loved one from prosecution or liability. I encourage all prescribers to write prescriptions for their patients and their families. Opioid overdose does not just happen to 'drug addicts.' Older Pennsylvanians can be forgetful and take too much of a prescribed medication. Children can get into the medicine cabinet and ingest dangerous levels of prescription painkillers. Naloxone, used safely by medical professionals for more than 40 years, has only one function: to reverse the effects of opioids on the brain and respiratory system. Additionally, I encourage all municipal police, municipal fire and emergency medical services companies to carry naloxone.

The opioid prescription drug and heroin crisis in Pennsylvania is serious and I thank you for holding this hearing to bring attention to the issue. I look forward to working together with you to protect the public's health. I will be happy to take any questions you might have at this time.