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Wolf Administration Highlights Impact of COVID-19 on Individuals with Substance Use Disorders and Collaborative Projects Through the Opioid Disaster Declaration

Harrisburg, PA – Wolf Administration officials today outlined the impacts of COVID-19 on people living with substance use disorders (SUD) and highlighted projects and collaborations made possible through the opioid disaster declaration’s creation of the Opioid Command Center.

“As we continue to evaluate 2020 overdose trends, we are seeing a significant uptick in fatal overdoses,” Acting Secretary of Health Alison Beam said. “We know that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges for people with the disease of addiction. Because of the disaster declaration in place, the entire Opioid Command Center, including the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, is able to offer a variety of support to people in need.”

While the 2020 counts are expected to increase further since finalized death records for overdose deaths are often delayed into the following year, there have been 4,880 drug overdose deaths reported thus far. This preliminary data, as of March 2021, indicates there were at least 422 more deaths in 2020 than in 2019. Since the overdose epidemic began, the most overdose deaths in Pennsylvania during a single year was 5,396 in 2017.

To understand potential reasons for the increase in overdose deaths and to identify opportunities to assist, the Opioid Command Center is holding meetings with counties, including Pike, Cambria, Allegheny and Lebanon, that experienced the most significant increases in overdoses during 2020. Meeting topics include fatal overdoses, emergency department visits for overdose, and EMS naloxone administrations and strategies to reduce overdoses at a local level.

“The state and local partnerships brought together by the command center have never been more important,” said DDAP Secretary Jen Smith. “As we navigate the coming months and impacts of COVID-19 on individuals with a substance use disorder and

those in recovery, the Wolf Administration is committed to continuing the fight to ensure all Pennsylvanians have access to necessary, life-saving resources.”

Through the collaborative effort of the command center, the Wolf Administration has been able to break down decade-long silos across agencies and work together to make a positive impact on Pennsylvanians struggling with the disease of addiction.

Prescription Drug Monitoring Program

Since the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program (PDMP) launched in 2016, there has been a 58 percent reduction in the number of individuals receiving a high dosage of opioid medication, a 54 percent reduction in the number of individuals receiving a dangerous drug combination of opioids and benzodiazepines, and a 38 percent reduction in opioid prescribing overall. In addition, there has been a 30 percent increase in the prescribing of [buprenorphine](#), which is used to treat opioid use disorder as part of medication assisted treatment.

Naloxone for First Responders Program

Since the launch of the Naloxone for First Responders Program (NFRP) in November 2017, Centralized Coordinating Entities (CCEs) have distributed 92,980 kits (2 doses each) of Narcan® to first responders across the commonwealth, including 29,578 kits distributed in 2020. These efforts have resulted in more than 17,970 overdose reversals reported to date by CCEs, including 5,282 reversals reported in 2020.

In March of 2021, the [command center announced](#) the availability of the Statewide Naloxone Allocation Request Portal which allows eligible organizations serving high-risk populations the ability to request additional naloxone nasal spray.

Police Diversion to Treatment

As of March 2021, the Police Diversion to Treatment project continues to support seven local Single County Authorities in expanding or creating collaboratives between law enforcement, treatment professionals, and recovery support providers to establish diversion programs aimed at offering treatment-based alternatives to arresting, booking, and incarceration for minor criminal offenses.

To date, 322 law enforcement officers have received training on a variety of topics related to police diversion, and 122 individuals were referred to and admitted into SUD treatment versus incarceration.

Medication-Assisted Treatment in State Corrections Facilities

In January 2018, after Governor Wolf signed the first Opioid Disaster Declaration, the Wolf Administration directed that Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) be provided within the Department of Correction’s (DOC) prison system. During 2018, the Vivitrol

program expanded to all 25 state prisons and in April 2019, the DOC began a pilot project program offering Sublocade injections at State Correctional Institution Muncy. In February 2020, the Wolf Administration announced more than [\\$1.2 million in grants](#) to nine county jails to support the county jail-based MAT program.

Supporting Pennsylvania Veterans

The Department of Military and Veteran Affairs (DMVA) continues to support a variety of existing and new programs tailored to the unique needs of veterans with opioid and stimulant use disorders. These programs provide a combination of evidence based co-occurring treatment including treatment courts, recovery support, and robust case management services.

Since September 30, 2020, across 11 organizations, and despite barriers related to COVID-19, a total of 432 Veterans have been served, and 53 staff have received specialized training related to these projects. Of the over 400 Veterans served, 98 percent of participants report a reduction in substance use and 88 percent report an overall improvement in quality of life.

“Our collaboration with DDAP to provide grants to veteran advocates is making a huge difference by educating and helping veterans overcome their substance use disorder,” said Brig. Gen. (ret.) Maureen Weigl, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs deputy adjutant general for Veterans Affairs. “However, now is not the time to take our foot off the pedal. We need to continue working together with a focus on raising awareness and reducing the number of veterans and members of the general public with a substance use disorder to zero.”

The Opioid Command Center, established in January 2018 when Gov. Wolf signed the first opioid disaster declaration, continues to meet weekly to discuss the opioid crisis and overdose deaths across the commonwealth. The command center is staffed by personnel from 17 state agencies and the Office of the Attorney General, spearheaded by the Department of Health (DOH) and Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP).

Last year the Opioid Command Center released its [strategic plan](#) to address substance use from a comprehensive approach. Work to address the opioid crisis focuses on four areas: prevention, rescue, treatment, and recovery. Efforts over the past several years, working with state agencies, local, regional, and federal officials, have resulted in significant action to address the opioid crisis.

To learn more about those efforts, visit www.pa.gov/opioids.

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