

Opioid-related overdose deaths decline for second straight year in Massachusetts

Opioid-related overdose deaths in Massachusetts declined by 4 percent in 2018 compared to 2017, marking the second consecutive year-over-year decrease in deaths, according to the latest quarterly opioid-related overdose deaths report released today by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. That 4 percent decline follows a 2 percent decrease in opioid-related overdose deaths between 2016 and 2017. In total, opioid-related overdose deaths declined 6 percent between 2016 and 2018. **Opioid-related related deaths declined 15% in New Bedford.**

Fentanyl, however, remained a key factor in opioid-related overdose deaths; it was present in the toxicology of 89 percent of those who died of an opioid-related overdose and had a toxicology screen in the third quarter of 2018. Meanwhile, the rate of heroin or likely heroin present has been declining since 2016, falling to about 34 percent of opioid-related overdose deaths that had a toxicology screen in the third quarter of 2018.

“While we are encouraged to see fewer opioid-related overdose deaths for a second consecutive year and a 35 percent decrease in reported opioid prescriptions since 2015, the opioid epidemic continues to present a very serious challenge that is made more difficult due to the presence of fentanyl,” said Governor Charlie Baker. “We look forward to working with our colleagues in the Legislature to continue ramping up the Commonwealth’s funding for prevention, intervention, treatment and recovery services in the FY20 budget, in addition to the

Administration's proposal to strengthen the hand of law enforcement by providing \$5 million to support a new Regional Fentanyl Interdiction Task Force."

"Our administration is proud of the progress we have made in coordination with the healthcare community, state and local officials to fight back against the horrible disease of addiction impacting every community across Massachusetts," said Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito. "These reports serve as critical snapshots in time and provide us with a view of the evolving nature of this epidemic, allowing us to more strategically target our response efforts and our resources."

In 2018, preliminary estimates showed 1,974 confirmed and estimated opioid-related overdose deaths or 82 fewer deaths than the 2,056 confirmed and estimated deaths in 2017. There were 2,099 confirmed deaths in 2016.

"The decrease in overdose deaths provides some hope that our approach to combating the opioid epidemic is having an impact," said Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders. "We must maintain an intense focus on this crisis and continue to expand opportunities to increase harm reduction initiatives and expand treatment and recovery services."

While the report showed an overall decline in opioid-related overdose deaths, Non-Hispanic black males experienced a 45 percent increase from 2016 to 2017 in the opioid-related overdose death rate.

"The opioid epidemic does not discriminate by race or ethnicity or by geographic region. Individuals and families of every race and in every part of the state have been impacted," said Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel, MD, MPH. "Our data analysis is critical to addressing the opioid epidemic and it points us in the direction where we need to go, in terms of focusing our education, outreach, and prevention efforts."

As part of that response, DPH has invested more federal opioid funding targeting communities of color, trained more individuals who are black or Hispanic as certified addiction counselors, and promoted public awareness campaigns in predominant communities of color. In addition, DPH plans to establish a community advisory process to help develop culturally sensitive programming and treatment and recovery strategies.

The report also showed that in the fourth quarter of 2018, there were 546,000 Schedule II opioid prescriptions reported to the Massachusetts Prescription Monitoring Program, representing a 35 decrease from the first quarter of 2015. Just over 246,000 individuals in Massachusetts received prescriptions for Schedule II opioids in the fourth quarter of 2018, a 37 percent decrease from the first quarter of 2015.

Other findings of the latest opioid report include:

- The percentage of opioid-related overdose deaths where prescription drugs were present trended downward from 2014 through 2016 and has remained stable since then. In the third quarter of 2018, approximately 15 percent of opioid-related overdose deaths had prescription opioids present in toxicology.
- Since 2017, the presence of some stimulants such as cocaine and amphetamines in opioid-related overdose deaths has been increasing.
- In the third quarter of 2018, the greatest number of suspected opioid-related overdoses treated by Emergency Medical Services continued to be among males aged 25-34, accounting for 25 percent of opioid-related incidents with a known age and gender.

The Baker-Polito Administration has made major investments to address the opioid epidemic, and with its FY20 budget proposal is recommending \$266 million in funding for substance misuse

treatment and services. Since FY15 the Administration has increased funding for treatment, counseling, education, and other services by \$147 million, an increase of 123 percent. The total includes funding made available through a federal 1115 waiver that allows Massachusetts to increase Medicaid coverage for specific Substance Use Disorder services.

In collaboration with the Legislature, the Administration continues to implement two major pieces of legislation that build on a public health approach of prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery. Last August, Governor Baker signed the second major legislative effort to address the opioid crisis which included the creation of new treatment pathways in emergency departments and county Houses of Correction; expansion of the municipal naloxone bulk purchasing program; removal of barriers for individuals accessing naloxone at pharmacies by creating a statewide standing order; and an expansion of the use of recovery coaches. In the fall of 2019, the Administration first filed legislation to develop a pilot program with input from many Massachusetts police departments interested in a regional, multi-agency approach to fentanyl interdiction and crime displacement. While the original bill was not passed by the end of the last legislative session, the proposal is now before the Legislature in a supplemental budget.

For more information on the Commonwealth's response to the opioid epidemic as well as links to the latest data, visit www.mass.gov/opioidresponse. To get help for a substance use disorder, visit www.helpline.ma.org or call the Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline at (800) 327-5050.