

NC Opioid Overdose Deaths Drop for First Time in 5 Years

By Administrator

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Emergency Department Visits Also Show Nearly 10% Decrease

For the first time in five years the number of unintentional opioid-related overdose deaths among North Carolina residents has fallen. According to preliminary data collected by the NC Department of Health and Human Services, unintentional opioid-related overdose deaths decreased by 5 percent in 2018. In 2017, deaths increased 34 percent from the year before.

These figures are consistent with the decreasing number of emergency department visits for opioid-related overdoses which declined nearly 10 percent from 2017 to 2018. The decrease reflects a preliminary estimate of 1,785 deaths in 2018 compared with 1,884 in 2017.

“This is a major milestone for North Carolina but the figures show we have much more work to do to keep people healthy and alive,” Cooper said. “Medicaid Expansion is the easiest and most effective step our state can take to continue our fight against this deadly disease.”

Governor Cooper signed the Opioid Epidemic Response Act into law in July 2019. This law removes the ban on use of state funds to purchase syringe exchange program supplies, decriminalizes the possession of fentanyl tests strips that allow people to test drugs for dangerous contaminants, and increases access to office-based opioid treatment.

The Department of Health and Human Services’ Opioid Dashboard tracks progress toward five overarching goals: reducing deaths, reducing oversupply of prescription opioids, reducing drug diversion and illicit drug flow, increasing naloxone access and increasing access to treatment and recovery services.

While the numbers have declined for prescription opioids, the data captured as part of the state’s Opioid Action Plan continues to show that most deaths and emergency department visits continue to be due to illicit opioids such as heroin and fentanyl.

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“Opioid overdose deaths and emergency department visits are two key metrics set forth in our Opioid Action Plan, and efforts to improve outcomes in those areas are clearly showing a positive impact,” said DHHS Secretary Mandy Cohen MD. “While this is a significant achievement, we know far too many North Carolina families are still suffering. We must continue to focus on prevention, reducing harm and connecting people to care.”

Today’s announcement builds on the progress shared at the state’s second Opioid Summit held in June 2019. From 2017 to 2019, opioid dispensing decreased by 24 percent; prescriptions for drugs used to treat opioid use disorders increased by 15% percent, and opioid use disorder treatment for uninsured and Medicaid beneficiaries increased by 20%.

The DHHS launched an updated Opioid Action Plan 2.0 at the summit to build on the state’s progress. This updated plan highlights the need for collaborations between local health departments, law enforcement, counties, non-profits and other organizations to identify impactful, feasible strategies to reduce opioid overdoses, increase access to treatment, and continue to gain more ground in the opioid crisis.

North Carolina’s DHHS has received over \$75 million to date in federal funding for prevention and to increase treatment capacity across the state. Other efforts aimed at reducing opioid-related deaths include:

- * DHHS launched an initiative to train medical residents, physician assistant, and nurse practitioners in providing office-based opioid treatment, reaching over 700 providers to date.

- * In collaboration with the Attorney General’s Office, DHHS participated in the More Powerful NC public education campaign to raise awareness about the opioid overdose epidemic and empower North Carolinians to take action.

- * DHHS launched a new medication-assisted treatment program pilot with the Department of Public Safety to reduce overdose-related deaths among people who are re-entering communities upon leaving prison.

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* DHHS awarded funding to 34 communities to implement post-overdose response teams, employ certified peer support specialists, implement safer syringe programs and implement programs and services for justice-involved populations.

* DHHS funded the NC Healthcare Association to implement an Emergency Department Peer Support Program to connect patients presenting with opioid overdose to treatment, recovery, and harm reduction supports, which has resulted in a decrease in emergency departments return visits and hospitalizations.