

## Key Takeaways

- No single organization currently coordinates overdose data or information across different agencies. Access to robust, real-time data could help local leaders combat and effectively react to new challenges in the overdose crisis.
- Pennsylvania is to receive \$1.07 billion in opioid settlement. Every county will receive a minimum of \$1 million. Counties should rely on evidence-based practices when implementing new programs and allocating these funds.
- Evidence-based prevention programs can be effective tools to combat the overdose crisis. Educators, policymakers, and community leaders should consider intentionally integrating such programs into the K-12 curriculum.
- There is a strong connection between mental health and substance abuse.
- While substance use disorder providers face a serious workforce shortage, state agencies can help increase capacity by streamlining administrative paperwork and audits across regulatory bodies. Furthermore, state agencies should re-evaluate staff-patient ratios to maximize workforce capacity.

## Background

On March 9, 2023, the Center's Board of Directors held its 19<sup>th</sup> public hearing on the opioid and substance use disorder (SUD) crisis in rural Pennsylvania. The Board heard from law enforcement, health care representatives, and academic professionals regarding recent developments in the composition and distribution of illegal drugs, and SUD prevention and treatment in rural Pennsylvania.

## Narcotics Supply

The first panel featured Executive Director Jeremiah Daley and Public Health Analyst Tamar Wallace of the Liberty Mid-Atlantic High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA). HIDTA provides intelligence support and training to task forces and law enforcement agencies investigating drug trafficking in specific regions. Mr. Daley noted that roughly 5,100 Pennsylvanians died in 2022 by drug poisoning, which was down 7 percent from the previous year but still almost twice the national average per capita. Over the past few years, fentanyl has become increasingly prevalent in drug poisonings, with more than seven tons of the narcotic seized by Customs and Border Patrol in 2022. Much of that fentanyl is entering the country in pill form, rather than the powder form of previous years. These pills are often made to mimic oxycodone, Adderall, or other commonly abused prescription medications. Also new to the market are nitazenes, which are made from multiple synthetic opioids. Mr. Daley suggested these new and dangerous changes in the opioid market reinforce the need for

widely available naloxone kits. Finally, Mr. Daley noted that while punishments for the trafficking of drugs should be severe, users experiencing substance use disorder are more likely to benefit from treatment, rather than punitive measures.

Ms. Wallace discussed the Opioid Response Strategy (ORS), a collaboration between the Office of National Drug Control Policy and the CDC Foundation focused on reducing overdoses in the U.S. ORS staff promote evidence-based prevention practices and data sharing among agencies that separately work to reduce drug poisonings. With Pennsylvania's highly decentralized county structure, regional collaboration can be valuable to successful prevention programs, since users often cross county lines to retrieve or use drugs. She encouraged rural groups to reach out to larger associations and agencies (including HIDTA) for funding and informational opportunities regarding fentanyl test strips. Different distributors allow county agencies to order test strips directly, but ORS is also encouraging state programs to provide strips to counties directly. Fentanyl test strips are no longer categorized paraphernalia (Act 111 of 2022), and studies show that access to strips can increase harm reduction practices among drug users.

## Data Resources

Captain Daniel Jones, Intelligence Division Director for the Pennsylvania State Police's Bureau of Criminal Investigation, focused his testimony on the Overdose Information Network (ODIN). ODIN is a database for law enforcement professionals that tracks both fatal and

nonfatal overdose events in and around the Commonwealth. The database went into effect January 2023, and state police anticipate nearly 40,000 authorized users over the next three years. The database categorizes the location of overdose events, use of naloxone, and de-identified demographic information. Currently, all law enforcement professionals who respond to overdose incidents are required to include overdose data in real time, but first responders and health professionals are not. While some other departments are adding data into ODIN, more could be done to increase data coordination and completeness across agencies.

## Funding and Programming

The third panel discussed current and upcoming developments in the funding of and programming for SUD treatment. According to Assistant Professor Dr. Glenn Sterner of Penn State Abington, Pennsylvania will receive \$1.07 billion from the 2022 opioid settlement with Johnson & Johnson, McKesson, Cardinal Health, and AmerisourceBergen. The distribution of these funds will be overseen by the Pennsylvania Opioid Misuse and Addiction Abatement Trust, which is comprised of 13 trustees that are appointed by several entities, including the Pennsylvania Legislature. Each of Pennsylvania's 67 counties will receive a minimum of \$1 million. The funds are to be divided among state and local organizations, with approximately 85 percent going directly to counties and municipalities. Dr. Sterner suggested that Pennsylvania's settlement money be invested in evidence-based programs. Specifically, he called for the use of harm

reduction models, and medication-assisted treatment. In addition, he called for funds to be used to coordinate data across multiple sources including law enforcement, emergency departments, public health organizations, EMTs, and others.

Commonwealth Prevention Alliance Executive Director Jeff Hanley discussed the importance of understanding the root causes of SUDs. Citing data from the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), he noted a strong connection between mental health and drug use but stressed that one does not necessarily cause the other. Mr. Hanley also emphasized the importance of prevention and the importance of allowing evidence-based programs sufficient time to work rather than expecting immediate results. He highlighted the Strengthening Families Program as an effective example of evidence-based programming that can have meaningful, long-term preventative impacts. Mr. Hanley also noted that county-level needs assessments have been done and can inform next steps, which may vary across the state.

Fayette County Drug and Alcohol Commission Executive Director Melissa Ferris discussed the multi-pronged approach her agency has taken in addressing substance use disorders. There are five different types of support in her agency:

- Case management support that does triage and intake for individuals seeking treatment and support.
- Recovery support that pairs individuals that have gone through recovery with those who are starting.
- Treatment support that provides medication-assisted treatment to individuals with opioid and alcohol addiction.

- Prevention support that meets with residents, employers, and other community groups to provide information and education on the importance of prevention.
- Community addiction support that works with first responders to visit overdose scenes and provide follow up support and information to overdose victims and their families.

Ms. Ferris said her organization and the Fayette County Commissioners are collaborating on plans for the settlement funding. Ms. Ferris also discussed the new Fayette County Prison that will provide a drug and alcohol unit to assist prisoners entering and leaving the prison. She concluded her comments noting the commission struggles with the stigma many residents have towards substance use and recovery.

### Workforce and Regulations

CenClear Director of Outpatient Services Justin Wolford, and Director of Substance Use Disorder Treatment Services Jason Snyder, with the Rehabilitation and Community Providers Association, both discussed the difficulties their organizations face with recruiting and retaining employees and the burden of regulations. Mr. Wolford pointed out that in 2022, CenClear experienced 126 staff member resignations, as these staff left to pursue other opportunities or different careers. This turnover created a great deal of stress among the entire staff and has made it difficult for the organization to assist new clients. Specifically, he pointed out that, because of four practitioner vacancies, CenClear could not provide services to 140 potential clients in need.

To address the workforce issue, Mr. Snyder called for a reexamination of the required staff-to-patient ratios. He suggested that required ratios no longer serve an important regulatory purpose and have become a significant barrier to accessing addiction treatment. Providers are forced to turn away those seeking treatment because they do not have enough qualified staff. Mr. Wolford and Mr. Snyder both gave examples of how difficult it is to recruit and retain employees in a tight labor market. Many of the people they seek must be licensed or credentialed. The salaries they offer these individuals cannot compete with those offered by fully remote corporate organizations, which can sometimes charge three times the reimbursement rates permitted through Medicaid and other insurance programs. As a result, both agreed the real surprise in this situation is not the number of providers that have closed, but the number that have remained in operation.

Mr. Wolford and Mr. Snyder also discussed the administrative burden of paperwork requirements, agreeing that state reporting requirements should place greater emphasis on client outcomes. They gave examples of multiple annual audits by different government agencies and the excessive paperwork that is needed to report patient progress every 30 to 60 days. To address the immediate workforce needs and free providers from excessive administrative paperwork, Mr. Snyder suggested that the state take immediate emergency measures to help all Pennsylvanians who need addiction treatment to get it and to focus on substantive regulatory reform.

**Thank you** to the hearing participants: Jeremiah Daley, Executive Director, and Tamar Wallace, Public Health Analyst, Liberty Mid-Atlantic High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area; Captain Daniel Jones, Intelligence Division Director, Bureau of Criminal Investigation, Pennsylvania State Police; Dr. Glenn Sterner, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, Penn State Abington; Jeff Hanley, Executive Director, Commonwealth Prevention Alliance; Melissa Ferris, Executive Director, Fayette County Drug & Alcohol Commission, Inc.; Justin Wolford, Director of Outpatient Services, CenClear; and Jason Snyder, Director of Substance Use Disorder Treatment Services, Rehabilitation and Community Providers Association.

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