

Opioid Overdose Deaths Increase in 2020

The number of opioid overdose deaths that have occurred thus far in 2020 are rising at an alarming rate. Due to the lag time in confirming cases of opioid overdose death, the actual size of the increase will not be known for some time. However, current information indicates that the number of opioid overdose deaths occurring in the first six months of 2020 is higher when compared to the same period last year.

In 2018, opioid overdose deaths in Illinois decreased for the first time in five years. However, the Illinois Department of Public Health estimates that opioid overdose deaths increased by 0.5% in 2019. Also, racial disparities in opioid overdose death rates in Illinois continued to increase in 2019 and African Americans are now twice as likely to die from opioid overdose when compared to Whites. While it is too soon to know the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on opioid overdose deaths, it has further complicated the response to the overdose crisis.

Human connection is a fundamental element of service delivery- whether a program is linking someone to harm reduction supplies or providing treatment and recovery services- and COVID-19 makes it more difficult for people to access human connection. Some overdose prevention strategies directly contradict strategies to prevent the spread of COVID-19. For example, COVID-19 guidance promotes social distancing, but a critical overdose prevention strategy is using drugs with someone else present. This is important because when people use drugs alone there is nobody available to administer naloxone or call for help in the event of an overdose.

Despite these challenges, treatment and intervention organizations across the state continue to provide access to evidence-based interventions that save lives and reduce the likelihood of opioid overdoses.

As International Overdose Awareness Day on August 31st reminds us, overdose death is preventable. Linking people to harm reduction interventions like Overdose Education and Naloxone Distribution (OEND) services can ensure that they have access to the opioid overdose antidote, naloxone.

Contact the Illinois Helpline to connect with harm reduction and treatment resources by calling 833-2FINDHELP (234-6343), text “HELP” to 833234 or go to www.helplineil.org/

Organizations enrolled in the IDHS/SUPR Drug Overdose Prevention Program (DOPP) continue to distribute naloxone in communities throughout the state. It is vital that every person who uses illicit drugs, or may encounter someone who does, has access to naloxone and is equipped to respond to an opioid overdose. When an overdose does occur, naloxone should be administered and 911 should be called so that the individual experiencing an overdose can receive emergency medical services.

Individuals who are interested in stopping their illicit opioid use should be linked with programs that offer Medication Assisted Recovery (MAR) options. The use of medications like buprenorphine (Suboxone) and methadone are proven to significantly reduce the risk of overdose deaths.

If you need assistance locating the nearest organization providing OEND or MAR services in your area, contact the Illinois Helpline for Opioids and Other Substances by calling 833-2FINDHELP (234-6343), text “HELP” to 833234 or visit www.helplineil.org. More information about overdose prevention and response can be found on the DOPP homepage at www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=58142.