

Massachusetts opioid overdose deaths on rise during pandemic

By Katie Lannan

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An estimated 33 more people died from opioid overdoses in the first nine months of 2020 compared to the same period last year, new Department of Public Health data show.

The 1,517 confirmed and estimated opioid-related overdose deaths through September represent a 2 percent increase from the deaths logged from January through September of 2019, according to figures presented at a Public Health Council meeting Wednesday.

The 2020 numbers cover a time period before and during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a public health crisis that has rattled the economy, kept many people in their homes for weeks or longer, and disrupted the way all types of services and care are delivered.

If the uptick holds through the rest of 2020, it would mark a break from a recent run of declining overdose deaths year to year.

The DPH report shows a total of 2,020 confirmed and estimated fatal opioid overdoses in 2019, down from 2,033 in 2018, 2,051 in 2017, and a high of 2,102 in 2016.

Public Health Commissioner Dr. Monica Bharel said the latest data shows an increase between 2018 and 2019 in overdose death rates for Black women and for Black and Hispanic men.

She said the overall rate of overdose deaths has stabilized since a 2016 peak, despite an increase in the presence of the

powerful synthetic opioid fentanyl.

Fentanyl, which Bharel called “the really deadly ingredient that we’ve seen drive the opioid deaths in this current epidemic,” showed up in 93 percent of toxicology screens for overdose deaths in the first six months of this year. Heroin was present in 16 percent.

“The opioid epidemic continues to impact too many families and vulnerable populations, who have had to contend with the added fears and stress of the pandemic,” Bharel said. “Be assured that we have not let up on our efforts to address the opioid epidemic. Over these last months, the extraordinary public health challenges presented by the pandemic led us to enact overdose prevention efforts, including expanded telehealth, reducing barriers to treatment, expanding naloxone distribution and receiving federal approval to permit licensed treatment programs to provide take-home doses of medications for opioid use disorder.”

Deirdre Calvert, director of the DPH Bureau of Substance Addiction Services, said officials have been “aggressively maximizing” access to substance use disorder treatment during the pandemic.

She said the ability to take medication home is “very important, because it decreases people at clinics, it increases people being able to stay home, stay isolated, physically distanced.”

As of June, 52 percent of patients seeing opioid treatment providers were receiving take-home doses, compared to an average of 15.6 percent in December 2019.

More than 75,000 naloxone kits were distributed to treatment providers, syringe service programs, community health centers, emergency rooms and houses of correction from March to June, Calvert said.

She said the bureau has also launched its own COVID-19 response team to address challenges like an increased risk of overdoses because of the combination of social isolation, changes to drug supplies, avoidance of treatment because of fear of contracting the coronavirus, and the pandemic's economic and mental health tolls.

"No matter how much naloxone we flood our system with, if people are using in isolation and nobody's there to give them naloxone, it's an issue," Calvert said.