

Massachusetts opioid-related overdose deaths fall 6 percent in the first nine months of 2019

Opioid-related overdose deaths in Massachusetts continue to decline, falling an estimated 6 percent in the first nine months of 2019 compared to the first nine months of 2018, according to preliminary data released today by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH). Between January and September of 2019, there were 1,460 confirmed and estimated opioid-related overdose deaths in Massachusetts, 99 fewer than the 1,559 confirmed and estimated opioid-related overdose deaths in the first nine months of 2018, the new quarterly opioid report shows.

The decline in opioid-related overdose deaths is occurring despite the continued presence of the deadly synthetic opioid fentanyl, which has risen to an all-time high. In the first six months of 2019, fentanyl was present in 93 percent of opioid-related overdose deaths where there was a toxicology screen, up from 89 percent of opioid-related overdose deaths where there was a toxicology screen in 2018.

“Today’s report affirms that our multi-pronged approach to the opioid epidemic is making a difference,” said Governor Charlie Baker. “Although we’ve made progress, we must continue to focus our law enforcement efforts on getting fentanyl off of our streets and out of our neighborhoods.”

“Behind these quarterly data are real people and families in communities across the state whose lives are impacted by addiction,” said Lt. Governor Karyn Polito. “We remain invested in proven strategies across the spectrum of

prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery to help individuals struggling with addiction and support local community efforts.”

The report found that the rate of heroin or likely heroin present in opioid-related overdose deaths has been declining since 2014 – while the percentage of opioid-related overdose deaths where prescription drugs were present has remained stable since 2017. In the second quarter of 2019, approximately 13 percent of opioid-related overdose deaths had prescription opioids present in a toxicology screen.

“By continuing to expand behavioral health access and provide additional resources for high-risk communities and for the highest risk individuals, we will make steady progress,” said Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders.

A significant finding in the report concerns the number of Schedule II prescription drugs and the utilization of the Massachusetts Prescription Monitoring Program or MassPAT. Massachusetts was the first state in the nation to limit the number of days for Schedule II opioid prescriptions and to mandate the use of the Prescription Monitoring Program prior to writing a prescription.

These findings include:

- In the third quarter of 2019, there were just over 500,000 Schedule II opioid prescriptions reported to the Massachusetts Prescription Monitoring Program, which is just over a 40 percent decrease from the first quarter of 2015 (n = 841,990 Schedule II opioid prescriptions).
- In the third quarter of 2019, registered MassPAT providers conducted more than 2.2 million searches, which represented an increase of approximately 200,000 searches since the previous quarter.
- Just over 227,000 individuals in Massachusetts received prescriptions for Schedule II opioids in the third quarter of

2019, which is nearly a 42 percent decrease from the first quarter of 2015 (n=390,532).

The new opioid report is accompanied by two new sections – one on opioid or benzodiazepine use in mothers during pregnancy and substance exposure in newborns, and the other on acute opioid-related hospital Emergency Department (ED) visits by gender and age compared to all ED visits.

Some highlights from these reports include:

- Between 2016 and 2019 in Massachusetts overall, 1.85 percent of mothers used opioids or benzodiazepines during pregnancy and 1.72 percent of infants were exposed to one of these substances in the mother's womb.
- Between January and September of 2019, the percentages of acute opioid and heroin-related ED visits among men were more than twice those of women. Individuals between 25 and 44 years old experienced the highest number of opioid-related ED visits.

"The release of this latest data indicates that our public health-centered approach to the opioid epidemic is working," said Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel, MD. MPH. "As we move forward, we will build on this success by continuing to focus on the widespread availability of naloxone, behavioral and medication treatments, and sustained recovery services."

Other findings of the new opioid report include:

- In the first six months of 2019, the greatest number of suspected opioid-related incidents treated by Emergency Medical Services (EMS) continued to be among males aged 25-34, accounting for 24 percent of opioid-related incidents with a known age and gender.
- Males comprise 74 percent of all opioid-related overdose deaths.

The Baker-Polito Administration, in collaboration with the

Legislature, has doubled spending to address the opioid crisis and increased capacity by more than 1,200 treatment beds, including more than 800 adult substance use treatment beds at different treatment levels. In addition, the Administration is investing nearly \$220 million over five years from the federally approved 1115 Medicaid waiver, which began in fiscal year 2018, to meet the needs of individuals with addictions and/or co-occurring disorders. The FY20 budget signed by Governor Baker builds on the progress to date by investing \$246 million across several state agencies to address substance misuse prevention and treatment.

Learn more about the statewide response to the opioid crisis. To get help for a substance use disorder, visit www.helpline.ma.org or call the Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline at (800) 327-5050.