

# Massachusetts opioid-related overdose deaths fall nearly 11 percent in the first six months of this year compared to last year

Opioid-related overdose deaths in Massachusetts continue to decline, falling nearly 11 percent in the first six months of 2019 compared to the first six months of 2018, according to preliminary data released today by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH). In the first six months of 2019, there were 938 confirmed and estimated opioid-related overdose deaths in Massachusetts or 112 fewer than the 1,050 deaths between January and June of 2018, the latest quarterly report shows.

The decline in opioid-related overdose deaths is occurring despite the persistent presence of the deadly synthetic opioid fentanyl. The presence of fentanyl has risen to an all-time high. In the first quarter of 2019, fentanyl was present in 92 percent of opioid-related overdose deaths where there was a toxicology screen. In 2018, fentanyl was present in 89 percent of opioid-related overdose deaths where there was a toxicology screen.

“Despite the battle we continue to fight against fentanyl’s presence in Massachusetts, the overall decrease in the first half of this year marks continued progress in decreasing opioid-related overdose deaths,” said Governor Charlie Baker. “We were pleased to work with our colleagues in the Legislature to invest more than \$246 million this year in prevention, treatment, recovery and education solutions to the opioid epidemic and remain committed to working with all

levels of law enforcement on removing fentanyl from Massachusetts communities.”

“Our investments across the spectrum of prevention, treatment, intervention, and recovery are paying dividends in communities across the Commonwealth and the data contained in DPH’s quarterly report inform the decisions and policies that have helped lead to better outcomes for many individuals struggling with addiction,” said Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito.

The 2018 opioid-related overdose death rate also fell an estimated 4 percent from 2016 – to 29.4 per 100,000 people from 30.5 per 100,000 people.

“The data is a promising indicator that our investment in a multi-pronged, multi-year strategy to increase access to treatment for this complex disease and underlying co-occurring illnesses is helping to save lives,” said Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders. “We must remain committed as a Commonwealth to employing every tool we have at our disposal to reduce the impact of opioid addiction and overdose deaths and to provide hope and recovery.”

The latest report is accompanied by a data brief on Overdose Education and Naloxone Distribution Programs (OEND), an important tool in the state’s efforts to reduce overdose deaths through prevention efforts and expanding access to naloxone. Naloxone is an opioid antagonist that acts as an antidote, temporarily reversing the effects of opioids when administered during an opioid overdose. The report also suggests that there needs to be additional efforts to promote access to Naloxone through the statewide standing order at all Massachusetts pharmacies.

“We are determined to build on the progress we have made and bring hope to families and communities across Massachusetts who are struggling with the impact of opioid addiction,” said Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel, MD, MPH. “Today’s

report signals that we are headed in the right direction.”

Among other findings of the latest opioid report are:

- Since 2017, the presence of amphetamines has been increasing. In the first quarter of 2019 it was present in about 8 percent of opioid-related overdose deaths where there was a toxicology screen.
  - The percent of heroin or likely heroin present in opioid-related overdose deaths where there was a toxicology screen has been declining since 2016 and fell to 30 percent in the first quarter of 2019.
  - The percentage of prescription opioids present in opioid-related overdose deaths where there was a toxicology screen trended downward from 2014 through 2016 and has remained stable since then. In the first quarter of 2019, approximately 15 percent of opioid-related overdose deaths had prescription opioids present in toxicology.
  - In the second quarter of 2019 there were just over 515,000 Schedule II opioid prescriptions reported to the Massachusetts Prescription Monitoring Program (MassPAT); this is a 39 percent decrease from the first quarter of 2015 (n = 841,990 Schedule II opioid prescriptions).
  - In the second quarter of 2019, registered MassPAT providers conducted more than 2 million searches, which represented an increase of approximately 200,000 searches since the previous quarter.
- Just over 236,000 individuals in Massachusetts received prescriptions for Schedule II opioids in the second quarter of 2019; this is nearly a 40 percent decrease from the first quarter of 2015 (n=390,532).
- In the first three months of 2019, the greatest number of suspected opioid-related overdoses 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.

The Baker-Polito Administration, in collaboration with the

Legislature, has made significant investments since 2015 to address the opioid epidemic and co-occurring illnesses in the Commonwealth. The FY20 budget signed by Governor Baker last month builds on the progress to date by investing \$246 million across several state agencies to address substance misuse prevention and treatment. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently awarded Massachusetts over \$6 million to 37 community health centers to establish and expand access to integrated substance use disorder and behavioral health services. As part of the administration's multi-pronged approach, DPH has also contracted with Boston Medical Center to provide training for hospital emergency department nurses on assessing and treating patients with opioid use disorder.

The Commonwealth is also engaged in efforts to reduce opioid overdoses in the workplace. According to the latest Fatal Injuries at Work Massachusetts Fatality Update (2016-2017), for the first time, unintentional overdose was the leading single cause of death on the job, resulting in 54 deaths during this time period, predominantly in the construction and food services industries. Eighty-five percent of these deaths involved fentanyl. Since 2018, the Commonwealth has committed more than \$300,000 in federal funding to develop training and materials on opioid education and prevention in the workplace, with a particular focus on occupations at highest risk.

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