

Reducing Prescription Drug and Heroin Abuse Stemming a Devastating Proliferation of Substance Abuse

Importance to Virginia

Across the country, more people now die from drug overdose each year than are killed in motor vehicle accidents or gun violence. In 2013, more than 900 Virginians died from an overdose. A majority of those deaths were related to prescription painkillers, while heroin-related deaths in Virginia nearly doubled from 2011 to 2013. The situation is especially dire in Southwest Virginia, where death from drug overdose has reached epidemic proportions. Central and eastern Virginia have the highest number of fatal heroin overdoses.

If we do not take action now to address prescription drug and heroin addiction in Virginia, the cost to the Commonwealth in health care, law enforcement, and most importantly, in lives lost, will continue to rise.

Goal

Virginia aims to significantly reduce the number of deaths in Virginia due to prescription painkillers and heroin.

Issue Background

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have identified a growing, deadly epidemic of prescription painkiller (opioid) abuse across the country. The rate of death from overdoses of prescription opioids in the U.S. more than quadrupled between 1999 and 2010.

Every day, more than 50 Americans die from overdosing on these drugs. In recent years, there has been a related surge in heroin use as people who are addicted to opioids turn to heroin, which is less expensive and easier to get. Although the overall rate of drug-induced death in Virginia is lower than the national average, sparsely populated Southwest Virginia has been disproportionately affected.

The region is home to only 1 percent of the state population, yet the Virginia State Police spent 25 percent of statewide drug investigation funds there. In Wise County, nearly 70 percent of the total police caseload is directly related to drug abuse.

The rates of emergency room visits and treatment admissions related to prescription drugs have risen dramatically, inflating health care costs for all of us at a time when we can least afford it.

Strategies for Success

Virginia has identified a number of action items, based on evidence of what has worked in other states, that the Governor can push forward immediately through executive action. This includes the

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creation of a Task Force to Combat Prescription Drug and Heroin Abuse to assist the Governor in driving a coordinated, statewide effort to reduce drug-related deaths. Strategies will include:

- Educating the public about the dangers of misuse and addiction to prescription drugs.
- Leveraging Virginia's Prescription Monitoring Program to identify emerging trends.
- Educating prescribers on best practices for safe prescribing of opioids and treatment of chronic pain and addiction.
- Expanding methods for safe storage and proper disposal of prescription drugs.
- Working with law enforcement to implement best practices when responding to those with opioid addiction.
- Improving access to substance abuse treatment services.

Timeline

The Task Force will release an implementation plan, including a timeline with milestones and goals for preventing prescription drug and heroin-related deaths. The Task Force will decide and report on specific metrics that will be used to track progress in multiple domains.

Measures of Achievement

The goal is a reduction in the number of deaths due to prescription opioid and heroin abuse, particularly in the regions of the state that are disproportionately affected by these drugs.