

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: The Clash of Two Epidemics-COVID-19 impact on Opioid Overdose

According to a recent research article published in the Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on public health. In addition to the direct effects of COVID-19 infection, physical distancing and quarantine interventions have indirect effects on health. While necessary, physical distancing interventions to control the spread of COVID-19 could have multiple impacts on people living with opioid use disorder (OUD), including impacts on mental health that lead to greater substance use, the availability of drug supply, the ways that people use drugs, treatment-seeking behaviors, and retention in care. The degree to which COVID-19 will impact the opioid epidemic and through which of the possible mechanisms that we discuss is important to monitor.

Researchers used the researching effective strategies to prevent opioid death (RESPOND) model that simulates the trajectory of OUD and treatment effects on drug use and overdose. The model is calibrated to historical population size and opioid outcomes. Researchers maintained that physical distancing and epidemic response measures will have two OUD treatment impacts: 1) decrease the Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) initiation rate; and 2) lower MOUD retention. Results indicate decreasing treatment initiation and retention rates on MOUD resulted in higher overdose death. Projecting into 2021, overdose mortality remained elevated compared to the counterfactual of “no COVID-19 epidemic,” even when physical distancing measures ended after three months. In every scenario of physical distancing duration and effect, overdose rates remained elevated compared to what would have been had we never had the COVID pandemic.

The COVID pandemic will likely have long-term negative implications for the opioid epidemic, resulting in increased overdoses, even if the impacts of COVID-19 on OUD care are modest and relatively short-lived. The full impact of COVID-19 is underestimated keeping in mind changes to drug supply, social isolation, reduced effectiveness of naloxone, or reduced access to emergency medical services. This research is based on feasible scenarios of MOUD use and the impact of COVID-19 on treatment initiation and retention. While it is possible that changes to OUD care delivery, such as telemedicine, could improve OUD care in the future, it is very unlikely that the COVID-19 pandemic will somehow result

in increased OUD care seeking at a time when all other healthcare is “on hold.” It is therefore essential that all possible efforts are made now to ensure MOUD treatment access and retention during the physical distancing period through telehealth, naloxone distribution, and peer-to-peer services. Since the COVID-19 epidemic is directly intersecting with an ongoing overdose epidemic, a concentrated effort to address the needs of people living with OUD is critical to enhancing public health during this crisis.

To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE’s website to learn more about the COVID-19 Epidemic and its correlation to increased mental illness, alcohol and substance use and SAFE’s Opioid Awareness Campaign at www.safeglencove.org.