

Press Release

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### **SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: Opioid Epidemic-West Virginia Trial**

West Virginia was among the states with the highest opioid-involved overdose death rates in the country in 2018, according to data from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. In 2018, West Virginia providers wrote 69.3 opioid prescriptions for every 100 persons, compared to the average US rate of 51.4 prescriptions, the data shows. The rate of drug overdose deaths in Cabell County West Virginia is even higher than the state average, according to the federal court complaint document. West Virginia, which has been considered to be ground zero of the opioid epidemic, being flooded with tens of millions of opioids, more than this community of 100,000 residents could require or bear.

The trial in West Virginia, as well as legal proceedings underway in California, could set the stage for resolutions to similar lawsuits brought by thousands of local governments across the United States. Opioid overdoses have been linked to the deaths of nearly 500,000 Americans since 2000 and reached a record of nearly 50,000 in 2019. The West Virginia case against the national distribution companies - — AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health and McKesson - is the first of those cases to go to trial. From 2015 to 2020, more than 700 people died of opioid overdoses in Cabell County, which has a population of under 100,000.

An expert witness maintains pharmaceutical distributors shipped nearly 128 million doses of prescription opioids to the county from 2006 to 2014 — or more than 140 per resident a year.

The companies say the shipments increased along with quotas set by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and came from orders from pharmacies to fill prescriptions. The distributors are expected to call witnesses on their behalf in the coming weeks. Yet the sprawling nature of litigation over the addiction epidemic around the country means it could take years to wrap up, years to get money to communities to expand treatment and to make up for some of the economic losses caused by the crisis.

State attorneys general, local governments and other entities have filed thousands of lawsuits over the last five years aimed at making segments of the drug industry pay for the lives lost or derailed by addiction. Before April, only one opioid case brought by a government had reached trial; in 2019, an Oklahoma judge ordered Johnson & Johnson to pay the state \$465 million. The company is appealing. Other cases were settled before reaching trial.

Two major opioid manufacturers — Purdue Pharma and the generic drugmaker Mallinckrodt — are using bankruptcy court to pursue universal settlements. In the Purdue case, state attorneys general are split over whether the proposed deal is sufficient to hold responsible members of the wealthy Sackler family who own the company. Under the proposal, they would give up Purdue Pharma and pay nearly \$4.3 billion in cash.

This year, the consulting firm McKinsey & Company settled with most states for nearly \$600 million for its role in advising OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma and others on selling opioids. Massachusetts sued the marketing firm Publicis Health earlier this month, accusing it of designing deceptive marketing schemes to help Purdue sell more OxyContin.

Some of the companies have indicated they see settling as in their best interests, in part because that route would likely not cost as much as losing in court repeatedly. The three national drug distribution companies, along with Johnson & Johnson, made public last year that they were offering a total of \$26 billion over 18 years to settle all the cases they face, with the money going to abate the crisis.

The SAFE Glen Cove Coalition is conducting an opioid prevention awareness campaign entitled. “Keeping Glen Cove SAFE,” in order to educate and update the community regarding opioid use and its consequences. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on [www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition](http://www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition) or visit SAFE’s website to learn more about the Opioid Epidemic at [www.safeglencove.org](http://www.safeglencove.org).