

Press Release

June 21, 2021

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT:

Dr. Sharon Harris

516- 676-2008

safeglencove@yahoo.com

SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: Opioid Epidemic Worsened By COVID-19

A recent article in the New York Times discusses the rise in opioid overdoses as the pandemic unraveled. According to the Times, drug overdose deaths rose nearly 30 percent in 2020 to a record 93,000, according to preliminary data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This data is the largest single-year increase recorded to date as several grim records were set: the most drug overdose deaths in a year; the most deaths from opioid overdoses; the most overdose deaths from stimulants like methamphetamine; the most deaths from the deadly class of synthetic opioids known as fentanyl's.

The death toll from Covid-19 surpassed 375,000 last year, the largest American mortality event in a century, but drug deaths were experienced disproportionately among the young. In total, the 93,000 deaths cost Americans about 3.5 million years of life, according to a New York Times analysis. By comparison, coronavirus deaths in 2020 were responsible for about 5.5 million years of life. The pandemic itself undoubtedly contributed to the surge in overdose deaths, with disruption to outreach and treatment facilities and increased social isolation. Overdose deaths reached a peak nationally in the spring of 2020, in the midst of the pandemic's most severe period of shutdowns and economic contraction. But public health experts said there had been a pre-pandemic pattern of escalating deaths, as fentanyl's became more entrenched in the nation's drug supply, replacing heroin in many cities and finding their way into other drugs like meth. After decades of increases, overdose deaths decreased slightly in 2018 but resumed their upward course in 2019, and drug deaths were rising in the early months of 2020, even before COVID arrived.

Rising deaths in the West, in particular, suggest a possible new phase in the epidemic. The national rise in deaths in recent years has been attributed in part to the introduction of fentanyl's, which are easier to manufacture and ship than traditional heroin. Fentanyl's began regularly appearing in the East Coast's heroin supply in the last seven years, where they were easy to mix with the most common type of heroin, also a white powder. Overdoses of fentanyl's, with their high yet variable potency, tend to be more common than overdoses of traditional heroin.

In the West, where most heroin is sold as a stickier substance known as black tar, fentanyl's had been less widespread. Researchers examining the drug supply there say they are seeing more fentanyl's sold as counterfeit pills, or sold alone as an injectable drug. An increase in overdose deaths involving both meth and fentanyl's suggests fentanyl's have begun penetrating the stimulant supply, too. It appears that the pandemic may have briefly interrupted the flow of fentanyl's from China into the United States. Then, a huge influx transpired when people's tolerance had gone down, and the situation exploded.

White Americans were hit particularly hard in the early years of the opioid epidemic, but in recent years deaths have been growing fast in nonwhite populations. In 2020, overdose deaths grew faster in Black and Hispanic populations than in white ones. The trend may reflect the growing reach of fentanyl's, which are now often found mixed with stimulants like cocaine and meth. They are reaching groups that were less likely to become addicted to prescription painkillers earlier in the epidemic. The stresses of the COVID pandemic have also affected Black, Latino and Native Americans disproportionately, with the potential to affect patterns of drug use.

Politicians, public health officials and clinicians have been battling the opioid epidemic for years. In 2018, Congress passed a package of bills meant to reduce the death toll by limiting overuse of prescription drugs and improving access to drug addiction treatment. And early this year, Congress allocated an additional \$1.5 billion to fight the epidemic.

COVID-19 brought some changes in addiction policy that may have saved lives. Temporary changes have made it easier for people enrolled in methadone treatment to take doses home with them, instead of requiring them to visit a clinic each day as more people in drug treatment had stayed enrolled as a result. Regulators also made it easier for people to seek medical care through telemedicine, another policy that may be extended beyond the COVID emergency. For the first time, federal funds (from the recent stimulus bill) can be used to buy needles and syringes for exchange programs, and to purchase rapid fentanyl test strips, which can be used to check whether drugs contain fentanyl.

The CDC will provide final estimates in a few months (overdose death investigations depend on toxicology reports and other testing that take time).

The New York Times is an American daily newspaper based in New York City with a worldwide readership. For more information please visit www.nytimes.com.

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 or visit SAFE's website to learn more about the Opioid Epidemic at www.safeglencove.org.