

Press Release

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: 2023: Opioid Epidemic Continues

Another new year begins for the U.S. opioid crisis, now more than two decades old. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 108,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in the last 12 months, the highest on record, and many more remain caught in the throes of addiction. While there have been some bright spots along the way — the number of drug overdose deaths slowed compared to prior years, more healthcare providers are prescribing medically-assisted treatment than ever before, and the opioid-reversing drug naloxone is becoming more mainstream — new challenges await.

As the drug trade continues to evolve, the U.S. must continue to evolve with it. Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid more than 50 times more powerful than heroin, remains the key element of the drug crisis and is increasingly found mixed with other illicit substances, including heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine. While chronic drug users initially shied away from fentanyl due to the short-lasting “high” and risk of overdose, many now purposefully seek it out after building up a tolerance to the powerful narcotic. Additionally, casual drug users unaccustomed to fentanyl continue to find ever-more potent varieties in counterfeit pills. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has found that 6 out of 10 fentanyl-laced fake prescription pills contain a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl, a 50 percent increase from last year. While they are most often made to look like oxycodone 30-milligram pills commonly known as “blues” or “M30s”, drug traffickers are likely to exploit the ongoing Adderall shortage by creating counterfeit ADHD medication containing fentanyl, methamphetamine or other substances.

This has important implications for drug users and first responders, who may encounter deadly substances in new places and need to administer multiple doses of naloxone to reverse drug overdoses. The government’s recently launched non-fatal overdose tracker will be critical to identifying shifts in the drug trade and formulating the appropriate response; for example, by issuing public safety alerts and surging resources to the hardest hit areas.

According to the DEA, the U.S. will also need to step up efforts to monitor the emergence of new illicit substances in the drug supply. Drug traffickers in Philadelphia have already

introduced “tranq dope” (a mixture of fentanyl and xylazine, an animal tranquilizer linked to severe skin ulcers, wounds and amputations, among other complications) into the drug supply. Drug traffickers will also continue to promote new products such as isotonitazene and U-47700 — two synthetic opioids with similar effects as fentanyl — to diversify their offerings and increase market share. Meanwhile, there is increasing evidence opioid users are turning to cheap, potent and abundant methamphetamine to offset some of the effects of fentanyl.

Researchers at the National Institutes on Drug Abuse (NIDA) have repeatedly discussed the need for policymakers to quickly advance legislation to address gaps in drug prevention, harm reduction and treatment, including efforts to improve access to telehealth, methadone and naloxone. Additionally, Congress must permanently schedule fentanyl-related substances under the Controlled Substances Act to ensure law enforcement retains the tools they need to effectively target these deadly substances and protect public health and safety. Finally, NIDA maintains policymakers must develop comprehensive, evidence-based strategies to maximize funding to state and local governments from opioid settlement funds, recognizing there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach.

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.