



Top City Health Officials Come to Capitol Hill with Dire Message on Opioid Addiction and Overdose

Big Cities Health Coalition Urges Immediate Federal Action

ATLANTA (FULTON COUNTY)

BALTIMORE CITY

BOSTON

CHICAGO

CLEVELAND

DALLAS (DALLAS COUNTY)

DENVER

DETROIT

HOUSTON

LOS ANGELES COUNTY

MIAMI (MIAMI-DADE COUNTY)

NEW YORK CITY

PHILADELPHIA

PHOENIX (MARICOPA COUNTY)

COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

SAN ANTONIO

SAN FRANCISCO

SAN JOSE (SANTA CLARA COUNTY)

SEATTLE (KING COUNTY)

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

(Washington, DC) – Today, the top public health officials from Boston, Chicago, and New York City, all members of the Big Cities Health Coalition, arrived on Capitol Hill with a grim report on the state of opioid addiction and overdose in our nation's cities – and a request for federal action to be taken immediately.

“Opioid addiction is one of the most challenging problems for health departments to address on a local level. Throughout the nation, cities have taken innovative approaches to respond to this epidemic, but working collaboratively with federal agencies on this issue could improve our outcomes,” said Dr. Barbara Ferrer, Executive Director of the Boston Public Health Commission and Chair of the Big Cities Health Coalition. “We’ve worked with local partners to implement innovative prevention and treatment strategies, but this calls for an all hands on deck approach.”

Cities have been on the front lines of dealing with opioid addiction and overdose (in the form of prescription painkillers and heroin) since the first wave of serious abuse hit the nation in the mid-1990s. While they have made significant gains in saving lives that would have otherwise been lost to fatal overdoses, city and county governments have been stymied by state and federal budget cuts that limit the capacity of local governments to provide emergency care and conduct community outreach.

Additionally, cities are unable to address onerous federal regulations that throw roadblocks in the path to providing addiction treatment to residents.

“Opioid addiction and overdose is a public health crisis,” said Dr. Mary Travis Bassett, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. “Yet the majority of opioid overdose deaths are entirely preventable. In New York City, we have taken a multi-pronged approach to addressing this crisis. Progress has been made in some of our hardest-hit neighborhoods, but there is much more work to be done. Changes to federal regulations are needed urgently to facilitate effective prevention, treatment, and management of opioid addiction and overdose.”

Some of the federal policies in question include Medicaid regulations that bar drug treatment services from billing for more than 16 beds and arbitrary restrictions on medication-assisted therapy for opioid addiction. Senator Edward J. Markey (D-MA) recently introduced legislation, The Recovery Enhancement for Addiction Treatment (TREAT) Act (S.2645), to expand the availability of medication-assisted therapy. The TREAT Act joins earlier proposed legislation, The Opioid Overdose Reduction Act (S.2092), a good Samaritan law that would protect providers and trained individuals from liability when prescribing or administering an emergency opioid overdose drug, such as naloxone.





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“With an epidemic as pervasive as opioid addiction, public health initiatives must work on multiple levels: seeking to save lives in real time, to treat and manage illness where it already exists, and to develop proactive measures to prevent future abuse,” said Dr. Bechara Choucair, Chicago Public Health Commissioner. “We are committed to fighting this epidemic in every way possible, but we cannot do this work alone. That is why we are calling on Congress to take swift action.”

In addition to endorsing Senator Markey’s legislation, the Big Cities Health Coalition is calling for increased access to naloxone, a medication that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose.

For more than a decade, cities have been at the forefront of developing solutions for the increasingly large group of Americans who are dependent on or addicted to opioids. Boston led the nation in making the life-saving naloxone (Narcan®) treatment available to EMTs and paramedics, a groundbreaking initiative that has since become accepted as a gold standard. The City of Chicago has recently joined Santa Clara County and Orange County in California in filing a lawsuit against five pharmaceutical companies, alleging that their marketing practices were deliberately misleading regarding the proper use of opioid painkillers and their potential for addiction. Other cities and counties have expressed interest in adding their voices to what could become a movement following in the footsteps of landmark tobacco litigation. In New York City, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is using a comprehensive approach to address opioid fatalities through innovative public health surveillance, equipping community members and first responders with naloxone, supporting syringe access programs, educating prescribers, increasing access to drug treatment, and public awareness campaigns.

Dr. Shelley Hearne, Director of the Big Cities Health Coalition, added, “To date, rhetoric on the federal level has centered on solutions that lack the necessary scope and funding to have a meaningful impact. Opioid addiction represents a gaping wound in our nation’s health, and city-level public health and law enforcement officials are being forced to make do with Band-Aids. We need a strong, collaborative partnership from the federal government to join in a comprehensive response to this public health crisis.”

About the Big Cities Health Coalition

The Big Cities Health Coalition (BCHC) is a forum for twenty leaders of America’s largest metropolitan health departments to exchange strategies and jointly address issues to promote and protect the health and safety of the 46 million people they serve. Together, these public health officials directly affect the health and well being of one in seven Americans. For more information about BCHC, please visit www.bigcitieshealth.org.

The BCHC is a project of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO). NACCHO represents the nation’s 2,800 local governmental health departments. These city, county, metropolitan, district, and tribal departments work every day to protect and promote health and well being for all people in their communities. For more information about NACCHO, please visit www.naccho.org.

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