

Statewide Alignment:

Coordinated Efforts for Delaware's Behavioral Health Needs

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As Delaware's Lieutenant Governor, I regularly travel up and down the state, speaking with Delawareans from Brandywine to Blades, and I'm often asked about the most pressing issues facing our communities. The topics range from education funding to job growth and public safety concerns, but the singular issue that has been felt by everyone is the impact of the opioid and heroin epidemic. It has been felt throughout every town and community in our state.

In 2017, overdose deaths claimed the lives of 345 Delawareans.¹ We will likely exceed that number for 2018. The opioid epidemic has become the public health crisis of our generation. As a public health nurse, I see the incredible devastation the loss of life has on families and communities. The need for swift action from policymakers, advocates and the medical community has never been more urgent. This public health crisis affects the entire spectrum of health care from the cradle to the grave and includes steadily rising costs, lost wages, and disability payments estimated at nearly \$467 billion a year.²

Since its formation, the Behavioral Health Consortium has sought to address not only the enormous impacts of the opioid and heroin epidemic, but also to identify the gaps within our entire continuum of care. I receive calls and emails every day from Delawareans desperately looking for help, many of whom don't know where else to turn. These families often seek guidance on ways to navigate a fractured system that is full of hurdles and gaps. Their calls are often the same: pleas to help their child, sibling or parent who is struggling with addiction and mental illness. Many are in active crisis.

Over the past year and a half, the Behavioral Health Consortium has hosted four statewide community forums engaging more than 600 stakeholders, including physicians, first responders, school nurses, families and so many others involved in this fight. There are six committees ranging from Access and Treatment to Corrections and Law Enforcement. The dedicated members of the Consortium are now hard at work executing the 117 point action plan, and we have had quite a bit of success. Delaware became the first state in the nation to implement an Overdose System of Care, which will model our more traditional systems of care like trauma and stroke. The Overdose System of Care will better align first responders, health systems and critical rehabilitation services in order to save lives and mobilize individuals into a path to recovery. Meanwhile, physicians and other health care workers have lead Narcan distribution and other harm reduction measures throughout our communities. Taking action to break down barriers, get individuals into treatment, and provide prevention measures will save lives. Implementing the Consortium's Three Year Action Plan is crucial to this mission.

This is why I was so thrilled to see the Delaware State Health Needs Assessment and Delaware State Health Improvement Plan's Recommendations Report.³ The report calls for a statewide media campaign with the goal of reducing stigma, integrating the work of the healthy neighborhoods, school based mental health screenings, and educational and payment reform opportunities for the practitioner community. These recommendations align with not only the Consortium's roadmap, but also the work of its committees.

Specifically, the Changing Perceptions and Stigma Committee are aggressively working with stakeholders on a comprehensive, statewide campaign that will reduce the stigma around behavioral health. Our Education and Prevention Committee has convened educators and mental health professionals from across the state to discuss evidence-based curriculum and mental health screenings starting in our highest need and at-risk schools.

In short, the Recommendations Report calls to attention the much-needed work in the critical area that is behavioral health. Although we have made improvements, we continue to identify additional gaps that need to be addressed quickly. As I have often said, this work cannot be addressed by piecemeal proposals. We must coordinate committed efforts and encourage those who might be interested to reach out to my office. We all know that it will take this type of collaboration to properly remove barriers that currently exist including stigma, lack of awareness, and inadequate access to care and prevention. We need dedicated leaders to step forward and get involved in order to achieve our goal of a stronger, healthier Delaware.

References

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