



NUMBER: 21-17
FOR RELEASE: Immediate

DATE: April 21, 2021
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Stanislaus County Opioid Safety Coalition Joint Press Release

Opioids: The Other Public Health Emergency Impacting Stanislaus County

Stanislaus County, CA — As the COVID-19 pandemic has killed more than a half-million Americans, it has also quietly worsened what was already one of our gravest public health crises: drug addiction.

Drug overdose deaths have surged during the pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that in the United States, more than 87,000 people died of drug overdoses in the 12 months ending in September 2020 — the latest figures available. That is the highest number of overdose deaths ever recorded in a year since the opioid epidemic began in the 1990's, the New York Times reported.

Stanislaus County is not immune to the increase of deaths caused by overdose. Stanislaus County has recorded 132 total deaths by overdose, in calendar year 2020; a 59% increase over 2019; 78 of the 132 deaths were opioid related. Although white residents continue to experience the highest opioid death rate, the largest increase was seen in the 18-24 year-old Latino/Latina community; increasing 150% from 2019 to 2020.

Nationally, the CDC has attributed the increase in deaths caused by overdose, to disruptions to daily life caused by the pandemic. This drove those Americans already in the shadows further into isolation, economic fragility, and fear, while disrupting the treatment and support systems that might have saved them. Increased isolation of drug users meant less contact with friends, family, and others who could try to revive them or seek help if they appeared to be overdosing.

The pandemic has also forced drug users to rely on different sources for their drugs. Drug users might not have been as aware of what they were getting, including the recent street formulations laced with the powerful painkiller Fentanyl. Pills not obtained with a prescription or from a pharmacy can kill.

Counterfeit pills that contain fentanyl, including counterfeit oxycodone pills, remain a statewide problem and affect Stanislaus County as well. Fentanyl is a highly potent painkiller, 100 times stronger than morphine and 150 times stronger than oxycodone. Fentanyl can be diluted with cutting agents to create the counterfeits, which mimic the effect of oxycodone but are much cheaper to buy on the street than oxycodone alone.

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Stanislaus County Sheriff Jeff Dirkse stated, “Unscrupulous drug dealers knowingly sell Fentanyl, or other drugs laced with Fentanyl, for a cheaper high. Their actions are killing people in our community.” Stanislaus County District Attorney Birgit Fladager stated, “We will pursue criminal charges, up to and including murder, for those who sell such poison to others.”

What every Stanislaus County resident can do to save lives:

Drug Disposal

Safe and secure drug disposal starts with cleaning out your medicine cabinet. A National Survey on Drug Use and Health asked respondents who misused prescription pain relievers to identify where they obtained the pills that they had most recently misused. The most common source, reported by half of all respondents, was "from a friend or relative for free." Proper disposal of unused or expired prescription medications prevents drug abuse, accidental overdose, and environmental impacts.

The next “Drop the Drugs” event is on Saturday, April 24th from 10am – 2pm at 800 11th Street in Modesto. It will be a drive-thru event located on the I Street side of the Stanislaus County Courthouse. Residents can bring medications including those for pain, such as opioids and Fentanyl, in their original containers which will be incinerated, protecting the identity of the individuals. This is an anonymous and free event. Sharps will also be accepted in a rigid, tightly sealed container.

Naloxone

Unfortunately, a drug overdose is no longer a rare occurrence. It has become increasingly important that citizens who may witness an opioid overdose – by friend, family, or stranger – be familiar with naloxone. Naloxone (brand name: Narcan) is a non-addictive life-saving medication that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose when administered in time.

Carrying a naloxone rescue kit is essential if you or someone in your life suffers from opioid use disorder. It is also important to consider having a naloxone rescue kit if you or someone you know has been prescribed opioids. Ask your pharmacist how you may obtain naloxone, even without a prescription.

Education

So many lives have been lost this past year, please take the time to learn about opioid addiction, overdose, and the steps you can take to save a life.

Drug addiction is a disease, not a moral failure. Stigma exists around drug addiction, yet anyone can find themselves dependent on pills. We should offer support and treatment options, not shame or blame, to those who are suffering. If you or someone you know is struggling with substance use, seek help now. Call 888-376-6246 or visit www.StanRX.net.

For more information on prevention, treatment, and recovery resources in Stanislaus County, the Drop the Drugs event & drug disposal, and how to get involved, please visit the Stanislaus County Opioid Safety Coalition website at www.StanRX.net

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