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September 24, 2015

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Fentanyl Significantly Contributes to Rise in Ohio Drug Overdose Deaths

*New Data Shows Some Promising Progress in Key Areas in Fight Against
Opiate Abuse, But More Work Ahead*

COLUMBUS – Based on law enforcement drug seizures, Ohio has seen a major increase in drug reports involving fentanyl, a more lethal opiate that is 30 to 50 times more potent than heroin. With 502 fentanyl-related drug overdose deaths in Ohio in 2014, fentanyl was a significant contributor to a rise in drug overdose deaths, according to preliminary data released by the Ohio Department of Health (ODH). By comparison, in 2013 just 84 deaths involved fentanyl. Overall, drug overdose deaths in Ohio increased from 2,110 in 2013 to 2,482 in 2014.

“At the same time we are experiencing positive progress in our fight against drug addiction, such as fewer opiates being dispensed and a decrease in high-doses of opiates, we are also seeing some individuals begin to use more dangerous drugs to achieve more intense effects,” said Mark Hurst, M.D., medical director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS). “As they build up tolerance to drugs they’re using, they may progress, for example, from prescription pain pills, to heroin, to fentanyl which is often cut into heroin.”

In response, the state is expanding the fight against opiate abuse to counter fentanyl and other opiate misuse. Building on efforts that started in [2011](#), state agencies are partnering to improve interdiction, raise awareness, expand treatment options and reduce the number of inappropriately prescribed pills. Additionally, Ohio is working with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to fully analyze Ohio’s fentanyl-related drug overdose data so that local and state officials, law enforcement and doctors better understand the nature of the fentanyl problem in Ohio and how to address it.

Since Ohio started to aggressively fight back against opiate abuse, the state has begun seeing some promising progress:

- The number of opiate prescriptions dispensed to Ohio patients in 2014 decreased by more than 40 million doses compared to 2013. Fewer doses lessen the opportunity for opiates to be redistributed or abused.
- The number of individuals “doctor shopping” for controlled substances including opiates as identified through the Ohio Automated Rx Reporting System (OARRS) decreased from more than 3,100 in 2009 to approximately 960 in 2014.
- Patients receiving prescription opiates for the treatment of pain at doses greater than an 80 mg morphine equivalent dose decreased by 10.8 percent from the fourth quarter of 2013 when Ohio’s opiate prescribing guidelines were announced, to the second quarter of 2015.
- The percentage of opiate prescribers registered to use OARRS increased by 30.3 percent from the fourth quarter of 2013 to the second quarter of 2015. This upward trend will continue because prescribers are now required to show that they are registered in OARRS for re-licensing.

- Ohio patients receiving prescriptions for opiates and benzodiazepine sedatives at the same time dropped 8 percent from the fourth quarter of 2013 to the second quarter of 2015. Multiple drug use was the single largest contributor to unintentional drug overdoses in 2014.

“We are committed to aggressively fighting opiate abuse in Ohio, including the rise of fentanyl,” said Andrea Boxill, OhioMHAS deputy director and coordinator of the Governor’s Cabinet Opiate Action Team (GCOAT). “We’re building on the many good things we are already doing by pursuing new initiatives to strengthen drug abuse prevention, expand efforts to control access to opiates; and continue to enhance access to treatment, but much more needs to be done to address this new crisis facing Ohio.”

Included in these new initiatives is an additional investment of \$500,000 per year to purchase the lifesaving overdose antidote naloxone. Also, Ohio officials released in July the *Health Resource Toolkit for Addressing Opioid Abuse* to help communities fight back. Additional new strategies and tactics can be found [here](#).

ODH’s release of 2014 preliminary drug overdose death data is seven months faster than past years and ahead of most states. By getting this data out more quickly it enables the state, local governments and Ohio communities to have a better understanding of the challenges they face and the tactics necessary to take on the struggle against drug abuse.

Learn more about fentanyl [here](#). The full ODH report is available [here](#), and a graphic timeline of past key initiatives to combat opiate abuse [here](#).

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