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Providers Fear Addiction, Overdose 'Surge' Amid Pandemic

As Ohio continues to grapple with the emergency caused by the novel coronavirus, a previous health crisis – drug addiction – has not gone away and could be exacerbated by the pandemic.

It will be months before a full picture of the opiate crisis during COVID-19 is apparent, but early signs show an increase in drug overdoses and deaths as much of the country locked down to contain the outbreak.

Preliminary data in Montgomery County, for example, showed 37 accidental overdose deaths in March, compared to 20 during the same month in 2019 and 14 in March 2018.

The state has also seen an increase in demand for naloxone, leading the Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services to seek **funding** from the Controlling Board to account for up to \$6 million in orders for the overdose reversal drug from first responders, health departments and others.

"Over the last several months, Ohio Pharmacy Services has seen an increase in the number of eligible organizations requesting to purchase naloxone," OhioMHAS spokesman Eric Wandersleben said in an email. "OPS has also seen an unanticipated increase in grant funds from various sources to pay for naloxone. Because of this, OPS made this request to ensure they could meet the needs of our community partners and ensure there is no delay in requests of this life saving drug."

Those indicators and struggles faced by providers are causing worry among Ohio's addiction services community.

"The pandemic is causing a lot of unemployment and a lot of fear, social isolation," Kelly Smith, state program and policy director for the Mental Health & Addiction Advocacy Coalition, said in an interview. "It's leading to anxiety and depression. I think everyone's biggest fear is that we'll see an increase in needed treatment services. Right now, we're preparing for a surge."

Ms. Smith said the increase in need for naloxone might stem from increased isolation due to stay-at-home orders.

"More people, more Ohioans who have a substance use disorder are using at home alone," she said. "It would be helpful if there was more access to naloxone."

The pandemic has affected mental health and addiction through access to services, the risk of providing those services and the stability of the system, she said.

The state helped providers early on during the crisis by relaxing rules around telehealth, allowing them to offer services remotely.

"That was mobilized really quickly by providers on the ground. So, when people haven't been coming in for addiction treatment services this was a new modality that they could use," she said. "They've been able to access people a lot more easily, which is really helpful."

That and other regulatory changes have helped providers stay open and continue to help, said Teresa Lampl, CEO of the Ohio Council of Behavioral Health and Family Services Providers.

"Not without challenges but community behavioral health organizations have been open for business and they continue to provide care at our clinics, in our community, and by telehealth," she said in an email. "Indeed, behavioral healthcare is essential healthcare and our workforce is often the invisible first responders and front line that gets people into treatment and keeps them in recovery and out of the emergency room."

Behavioral health providers were already under strain before the pandemic hit, she said.

"Now our treatment infrastructure is under extreme stress, with many providers experiencing significant loss of operating revenue coupled with rising costs," she said.

Further emergency assistance is still needed to support Ohio's mental health and addiction treatment infrastructure, Ms. Lampl said. Otherwise, the industry could see layoffs and closures as demand increases.

"In addition to additional emergency federal resources directed toward behavioral health organizations, we are encouraging policy makers to sustain and enhance their recent investments in Ohio's community behavioral health system, including the extension of telehealth services," she said.

The COVID-19 pandemic could have long-term effects on Ohio's addiction crisis, she said.

"There is no doubt that COVID-19's social disruptions and economic destruction are already causing widespread fear and anxiety, a sense of isolation, post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, and grief," she said. "The fallout from this crisis will have lasting impact on our communities."