



# ALLEGHENY COUNTY

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### **Allegheny County Sees 41 Percent Reduction in Overdose Deaths** *Opioid Response Team Credits Action on Numerous Fronts, Work Still Needed*

**PITTSBURGH** – With just a handful of cases remaining to be cleared, the Allegheny County Office of the Medical Examiner reported today that the number of deaths from accidental overdoses during 2018 currently sits at 432. The significant difference from the 2017 number of 737 represents a 41% change and is the lowest figure from the past three years.

“I frequently talk about the success that we have in this region when we all work together. There is no better example of that than the county’s efforts around opioid addiction and overdose,” said County Executive Rich Fitzgerald. “Our departments move quickly and worked proactively to attack this issue on a variety of fronts and was supported by Governor Wolf and his administration, as well as our local foundations, which provided additional resources to allow our efforts to be even more impactful. While we have a lot more work to do, the 41% reduction in deaths reflects that we are moving in the right direction.”

The data from the 2018 deaths are very similar to prior years. The victims are 68% male, 94% white and come from one of three age groups: 35-44, 25-34 or 45-54, accounting for 74% of all deaths. As has also been seen previously, overdose deaths were almost always caused by a mixture of drugs. Fentanyl remains the drug found most commonly in these mixtures with heroin and cocaine rounding out the top three.

“The sharp decline in overdose deaths in 2018 is a pleasant and largely unexpected event. Although the increased availability to naloxone certainly played a large role, the importance of collaborative efforts among the various county agencies cannot be underestimated,” said Dr. Karl Williams, Medical Examiner. “Availability of accurate and up-to-date data on the crisis through OverdoseFreePA is a critical feature of the hard work that is unique to Allegheny County.”

In addressing the opioid crisis, an internal Opioid Response Team was put together consisting of the Medical Examiner’s Office, County Police, the Health Department, Emergency Services, Human Services, and the Jail with support and guidance from the Manager’s Office and CountyStat. The team meets monthly to provide updates on efforts in each department and to discuss action items or other steps that could be taken to address the growing number of deaths.

“Opioid overdose deaths have taken so many lives and we mourn their loss,” said Dr. Karen Hacker, Health Department Director. “We have worked hard to stem the tide of this deadly epidemic and seeing impact is rewarding; however, we know that we cannot take our feet off the gas. There are still far too many dying and our efforts, and those of our partners, will continue.”

The Health Department launched a multi-faceted effort to address opioid addiction and overdoses in the county and continues to track emergency room data and information from EMS agencies and others. One such effort has been in training people in naloxone administration and making kits available. In 2018 alone, the Health Department distributed over 8,000 naloxone kits and trained over 2,000 people. The department also hired staff to work specifically on this issue and has utilized grant funding to address issues in particular communities where overdoses and deaths are higher. Focused on harm reduction, the department has also supported syringe exchange operations and expansion,

addressed an increase in Hepatitis C, and has increased its capacity for sustained community outreach.

“We’ve seen the devastating impact of the opioid crisis in just about every area of our Human Services and throughout our communities. A big focus of our work moving forward will be to continue to find ways to provide easier access to treatment for those in need,” said Marc Cherna, Human Services Director.

One of the biggest challenges for treatment has always been in ensuring that treatment beds are available. Although there are currently thousands, there is a need for more and additional communication with treatment facilities to quickly identify vacancies. Human Services is working to create treatment centers to fill that gap and provide non-biased, standardized screening for individuals. Additionally, DHS employees are also being trained on naloxone administration. The department is also working closely with the Jail to help facilitate meetings with methadone clinics to help inmates get into treatment upon release. Its staff also continues to focus on other services to support those in recovery, including hosting job fairs and making other connections to strengthen their support.

Additional efforts undertaken by other team members include:

- Emergency Services
- Telecommunications officers are walking 9-1-1 callers through how to administer naloxone and are receiving about 35 such calls a month
  - Assisting with state grant to provide naloxone to first responders; to date, have added another four agencies that were not previously carrying the drug – currently, approximately 80% of quick response service units carry the drug
  - Works closely with EMS agencies to provide naloxone distribution and training to all 40 agencies in the county

- Jail
- Addiction issues are identified on intake, but additional steps have been taken including the hiring of a detox nurse
  - The facility is seeking certification from the state for a drug and alcohol education program for female inmates; the facility currently has a program for male inmates
  - Inmates nearing release are trained on naloxone administration and are also provided with a dose of the drug upon release; working with alternative housing facilities, that effort will also be duplicated at those sites
  - Peer recovery specialists have begun working on the pods to make connections to programs and support networks before they leave the facility

Further details on the overdose deaths in the county for 2018, and prior years, can be found on the OverdoseFreePA website: <https://www.overdosefreepa.pitt.edu>.

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