Minnesota County Takes on Opioid Crisis by Treating Inmates

March 05, 2019

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Hennepin County made smart use of data to come up with a promising solution to the opioid crisis. Now the plan is to treat jail inmates behind bars who are at risk of overdose. This solution will provide inmates medication for withdrawal symptoms. The second phase involves connecting them with treatment professionals after their release from custody.

State and federal lawmakers are still weighing in on the different measures that can be taken to fight the nation?s opioid epidemic. But this Minnesota county?s plan serves as a timely reminder that pragmatic solutions are necessary as soon as possible.

This new initiative currently has no official name. But the aim is clear and simple: treat a large group of Minnesotans who have a high risk of addiction to prescription painkillers by using proven and effective medications approved by the FDA.

The reason that the project primarily targets inmates is that the group has an incredibly high risk of dying from an overdose, especially after their release.

A 2017 survey of 851 inmates at the Hennepin County jail shows that 20 percent acknowledged using opioid drugs. Most were still hooked on the drugs when they were arrested, while an astounding 64 percent of them had previously overdosed.

Another report sheds a disturbing light on what happens after inmates are released. A lot of them die swiftly from complications caused by opioid use.

Nearly 30 percent of all opioid deaths in Minnesota and in Hennepin County occurred within one year of release. This means that over half of opioid-related deaths in the year after release occurred in the first 90 days.

What makes treatment so difficult is the fact that medications are inaccessible during incarceration and upon release. The data-driven findings indicate a clear need for a policy change in Minnesota, and this move by Hennepin County can set this in motion. Addiction experts agree that the crisis must be fought on all fronts in order to limit the number of opioid deaths immediately.

Saving the lives of inmates is not only a logical step but also one that can yield long term benefits. It could reduce crime in communities by reducing the risk of reoffending to buy drugs.

The Hennepin County program is expected to launch this spring. However, a small-scale effort has already begun.

County officials have already applied for a $500,000 state grant to administer it. These funds will come from the $17.7 million the state received last year as a part of the federal fight against opioids.

The key steps are straightforward. It will screen for opioid disorders during intake while providing medications that can help ease the discomfort caused by withdrawal. All addicted individuals and drug dependent patients go through withdrawal one way or another, and so it is important to make sure there is a treatment for it. Recovering from withdrawal is a natural part of regaining sobriety.

The plan has also caught the eye of law enforcement agencies elsewhere, and now there is commendable interest in replicating it.

These programs are expected to reduce or limit the barriers to opioid addiction treatment, especially in a time where the whole country is seeing increasing numbers of overdose deaths.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of

medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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