Connecticut Overdose Crisis Continues Despite Statewide Narcan Initiatives

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It's been one year since Connecticut lawmakers passed state legislation that allows pharmacists who have been trained and certified to prescribe the opiate overdose reversal medication naloxone to anyone who asks for it. However, local advocacy groups say misinformation and stigma have prevented the majority of people who need the lifesaving drug from accessing it, Fox News reports.

On June 23, 2016, New Haven health authorities reported 17 overdoses in the city, which left three people dead and forced the city into a health emergency. The drug that caused the crisis was fentanyl, a potent synthetic opioid often used in hospitals that is now one of the most commonly diverted painkillers in America. First responders were able to save the survivors using naloxone, commonly known under its brand name Narcan, which reversed their overdoses.

Health officials in Connecticut are now stressing the fact that, thanks to a law passed last July, anyone who walks into a certified pharmacy can pick up a Narcan kit and be taught how to use it. Authorities are also encouraging anyone at risk of having or witnessing a drug overdose to carry Narcan with them at all times, the same way people with asthma would carry a rescue inhaler.

Last week, Connecticut's insurance commissioner sent a reminder to health insurers across the state that Narcan and other FDA-approved opioid abuse deterrent drugs must be covered when medically necessary. However, additional copays and cost sharing under many plans in the state continue to block patient access to the medication.

Local harm reduction advocates also say the lack of public participation in Connecticut's Narcan outreach program is the result of misconceptions, stigma and a lack of awareness of the drug's widespread availability. A statewide coalition is currently working to raise awareness by sending addiction advocates to their communities to educate people about the overdose reversal agent, but so far, a very low percentage of injection drug users have agreed to learn how to use it.

"I'm not here to judge people," said New Haven pharmacist Edmund Funaro Jr., one of the more than 700 pharmacists in Connecticut who have received Narcan certification over the last year. "Whether you're a drug user or not, the more Narcan we can get into people's hands the more lives we can save, that's the bottom line."

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