Hepatitis Detection Efforts in West Virginia Get Nearly $400K Boost

Some of the federal funds in West Virginia will address the link between opioid misuse and HIV and hepatitis.

April 29, 2021 By Trent Straube

The federal government has awarded West Virginia about $393,000 for viral hepatitis surveillance, according to an announcement from the state's U.S. senators, Republican Shelly More Capito and Democrat Joe Manchin. Of that funding, $78,659 has been set aside to explore how the opioid epidemic affects rates of infectious diseases such as hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS.

Specifically, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) awarded $393,182 to the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources.

"I am pleased HHS is investing in funding for observation and prevention of viral hepatitis, as well as increasing access to testing, prevention and treatment services," Manchin said in the press release. "The investments from HHS will also help to address the side effects of drug misuse, including infectious diseases."

"As Kanawha County and other parts of the state continue to battle rising HIV cases, it's important that we continue to direct more resources to protect those living with HIV and other infectious diseases in our communities," added Capito. "There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the substance use crisis in West Virginia, bringing unforeseen consequences with it."

Indeed, the Mountain State has made national headlines this year for the spike in HIV cases related to the opioid epidemic. West Virginia received $2.4 million in federal funds to help prevent, test and treat HIV. The latest jump in HIV rates stems from cases in Kanawha County, which includes the state capital, Charleston. HIV cases linked to injection drug use increased from two in 2018 to at least 35 in 2020. This compares with 36 in New York City, which has over 8 million more residents than Kanawha County (population: 178,000).

As reported in February, Demetre Daskalakis, MD, MPH, a federal health official, characterized the HIV outbreak as the "most concerning in the United States among people who inject drugs." He told BuzzFeed News, "It is possible the current case count represents the tip of the iceberg."

The diseases are taking an economic toll on the state. Quoting a report from the West Virginia

Center on Budget and Policy, an April article noted: “The total economic damage caused by the drug crisis in West Virginia amounted to about $11.3 billion; in Kanawha County, the total reached $1.7 billion. These amounts represent approximately 15% of the state and county gross domestic products, respectively.”

Despite the rising health concerns and economic costs, the state’s governor, Jim Justice, signed into law last month a bill that restricts needle exchanges, despite evidence showing that such programs can help lower the spread of HIV and hepatitis. As a different BuzzFeed News article points out, the new law will likely lead existing syringe programs to shutter or force them underground.

“You’re actually talking about human beings here. This will kill them or make them sick,” Laura Jones at Milan Puskar Health Right in Morgantown, West Virginia, told BuzzFeed News.

Hepatitis B and C, which are infections of the liver, and HIV can be spread through shared needles. To learn more about transmission, prevention and treatments, see the HIV Basics in POZ and the Hepatitis B Basics and Hepatitis C Basics in HepMag.com.

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