Merck Foundation Pledges $2 Million to Address Opioid Epidemic in West Virginia

The pharmaceutical company's grant-making arm is teaming up with Marshall Health to address areas hit hardest by opioids.

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As the U.S. opioid crisis continues to devastate communities across the nation, The Merck Foundation is pledging a $2 million grant toward fighting opioid addiction, hepatitis C virus (HCV) and overdose deaths in West Virginia, one of the areas that's been hit the hardest by the epidemic, a recent press release from the organization reports.

The money will help fund a new initiative with Marshall Health, the faculty practice plan of the Marshall University Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, one of the region's only academic health systems. Called the Great Rivers Regional System for Addiction and Care, the initiative will help develop an innovative, comprehensive public health approach to reducing opioid overdoses and deaths, improve access to substance abuse prevention and treatment services and help to reduce new HIV and hepatitis C infections. Funding will be distributed over four years and will largely focus on rural areas.

Currently, West Virginia has the highest overdose rate in the United States and ranks first for rates of hepatitis B virus (HBV) and second for rates of hepatitis C. The state is largely rural and geographically isolated, making access to care and harm reduction services incredibly difficult. Merck says its latest program seeks to address these disparities.

According to initiative leaders, key components of the new system will include funding for comprehensive harm reduction programs, such as risk reduction services, prevention education, counseling and referral services. The grant will also help fund community quick-response teams, open up clinical pathways to treatment and recovery services in local hospitals, and create specialized addiction treatment.

"We believe this comprehensive, integrated program can be a model for others working to tackle the challenges of the opioid epidemic and the spread of infectious diseases," said Lori Tremmel Freeman, CEO of the National Association of County and City Health Officials in West Virginia, which has signed on with the effort, adding: "It is only through a coordinated approach working

with local communities that we can make headway against the multi-faceted issues the opioid crisis raises.”

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