President Trump Declares U.S. Opioid Crisis a “Public Health Emergency”

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Yesterday, President Trump directed the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to declare the U.S. opioid crisis a “public health emergency.” The announcement is a significant symbolic action but does not include a request for additional funds to address the issue, The New York Times reports.

“We are going to overcome addiction in America,” the president said during an emotional ceremony in the White House’s East Room attended by families affected by the ongoing prescription painkiller and heroin crisis, several members of Congress and administration officials. “No part of our society — not young or old, rich or poor, urban or rural — has been spared this plague of drug addiction and this horrible, horrible situation.”

However, harm reduction and addiction advocates have been quick to point out that the directive does not on its own release any additional funds to deal with the ongoing epidemic, and the president did not request any in his speech (though aides later said he would soon do so). The announcement falls short of Trump’s promise in August to declare “a national emergency” on opioids, which would have prompted that funding.

That said, the declaration allows for some grant money to be used to combat the opioid crisis, permits the hiring of addiction specialists and expands the use of telemedicine for rural patients with substance abuse disorders. Trump said his plan would also include a requirement that prescribers employed by the federal government receive special training in safe practices for opioid prescribing, as well as intensified efforts by the U.S. government to block shipments of fentanyl (a cheap, synthetic opioid many times more powerful than heroin) from entering the country from China.

Trump also said he would suspend a rule that prevents Medicaid from funding many drug rehabilitation facilities and would launch a “really tough, really big, really great advertising” campaign aimed at preventing Americans from using drugs in the first place (similar to Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” antidrug campaign in the 1980s).

However, without a substantial commitment of federal money to address the epidemic or a clear national strategy for changing the way the U.S. approaches addiction, many experts and advocates say the plan is unlikely to make a difference.

For instance, Andrew Kolodny, codirector of opioid policy research at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University told the Times that until things like opioid addiction treatment programs and syringe exchanges are easier to access than heroin, fentanyl or prescription drugs, overdose deaths are unlikely to decline.

Beyond the lack of funding, it is also unclear who exactly will carry out the plans Trump overviewed in yesterday's speech. The president has yet to hire a "drug czar" or a secretary of health and human services to steer a broader strategy on the U.S. opioid crisis and identify additional sources of funding. Currently, the Public Health Emergency fund alluded to in Trump's announcement has only $57,000 to its name.

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