

Attorney General Janet Mills Releases 2017 Maine State Drug Death Statistics

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AUGUSTA - The State of Maine saw 418 drug-induced deaths in 2017, according to figures released today by Attorney General Janet Mills. Drug overdose deaths increased by 11% in 2017 over the previous year. The data was collected and analyzed by Marcella H. Sorg, PhD, of the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, under a contract with the Office of the Attorney General.

While the increase is not as significant as the nearly 40% increase in deaths in 2016 over the previous year, the number of deaths in 2017 was driven by a sharp increase of 27% in deaths due to illegal fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, while heroin deaths decreased. In addition, 2017 saw an increase in both cocaine and methamphetamine deaths and a decrease in deaths caused by benzodiazepines.

Most drug deaths were caused by two or more drugs, and the average cause of death involved 3 drugs. The vast majority of overdose deaths (85%) were caused by at least one opioid, including pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical (illegal) opioids. Most of the pharmaceutical opioids, or prescription drugs, were not prescribed for the decedent. Naloxone (Narcan) was detected in 31% of the decedents, which indicates that someone attempted to revive the individual but that attempt was too late.

The highest number of drug overdose deaths in 2017, or 26% of them, occurred in Cumberland County, with 57 of those deaths - more than one a week - occurring in Portland. York County saw 82 deaths, or 20% of the statewide total, with 23 of these in Biddeford. Penobscot County had the third highest number of deaths, with 65, or 16% of the total. The average age of drug overdose deaths has remained stable at 41, or close to the average age of the population of the state.

"Fentanyl has invaded our state," noted Attorney General Mills, "killing 247 people last year alone. Five of these deaths were due to the lethal drug carfentanyl. When people ingest this powerful powder, they often believe it is heroin, and have been told it's heroin," Mills added. "But no one should take a chance with these substances. Even as dangerous as heroin is, fentanyl is hundreds times more likely to kill you. The equivalent of a few grains of fentanyl can take your life. It is so dangerous that the federal DEA has warned police and public safety personnel to guard against exposure to fumes from fentanyl powder."

Illicit fentanyl and its analogs are manufactured in labs in China and often shipped into the United States through other countries and into Maine through Massachusetts and other states. Traffickers often lace heroin with fentanyl and sell fentanyl as heroin because fentanyl is cheaper to make and the profit margin for dealers is so much higher.

Attorney General Mills has served on two task forces, the Maine Opiate Collaborative and the Legislature's Task Force to Address the Opiate Crisis, and has offered her own ten-point plan to address the opiate epidemic. A copy of the ten-point plan can be found at www.maine.gov/ag/news/index.shtml.

"Public education and prevention are key," AG Mills stated, "along with a progressive approach to treatment, including the hub-and-spokes' model used in Vermont. In addition, we need triage teams with recovery coaches and medication assisted treatment available at every emergency room, and more drug courts to help those in trouble with the law."

Attorney General Mills thanked Dr. Sorg for her detailed analysis and the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for their handling of the significant increase in deaths due to drug overdoses in the past few years.

The full report may be found at www.maine.gov/ag/news/index.shtml.