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Public Health Madison & Dane County: Overdose fatality review reveals troubling trends in Dane County

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Public Health Madison & Dane County released its report on the 2022 Dane County Overdose Fatality Review (OFR). The report is a representation of efforts to gather data, analyze trends, hear real accounts from families impacted by drug overdoses, and develop recommendations to prevent future deaths.

“Drug overdose deaths are 100% preventable. The Overdose Fatality Review provides us with the unique opportunity to gather comprehensive information about overdose victims’ lives and interactions with various systems to better understand what factors may have contributed to these deaths,” said Director of Public Health Madison & Dane County, Janel Heinrich.

The Dane County OFR Case Review Team reviewed data on overdose deaths from 2018-2020 (the most recent complete data available). They also conducted an in-depth examination of the lives of 20 people who died in 2020. Here are some key takeaways:

- 138 people lost their lives to drug overdose in 2020, a 39% increase since 2016.
- Opioids continue to drive drug overdose deaths, with nearly 9 in 10 deaths involving an opioid.
- Deaths from synthetic opioids, like fentanyl, have increased rapidly in Dane

County.
- Nearly half of the people who died of a drug overdose died with multiple drugs in their system.

The team offered interviews to families who lost a loved one to drug overdose in 2020, leading to conversations with 25 people who shared stories about their loved ones.

“The family interviews provide insight and context not found in medical or criminal justice records,” said Julia Olsen, Public Health Supervisor. “We know that behind the numbers there are real human beings who were loved and are missed, lives that could have been saved. That is what drives each member of our team to commit to this ongoing work.”

The report generated many recommendations including expanding Harm Reduction services, developing a Dane County EMS Leave Behind program, reducing stigma, and increasing resources to support substance use prevention.

“We have begun implementing recommendations like promoting the Never Use Alone program and are actively seeking additional funding to expand our capacity to move more of these recommendations into action,” said Olsen.

The 31-page OFR report is available to view at publichealthmdc.com/OverdosePrevention, where you can also learn more about the Public Health Syringe Services Program and sign up to receive Overdose Spike Alerts.