

State Director of Opioid Initiatives says efforts 'creating positive change'

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As Wisconsin is set to start receiving its share of national opioid settlement funds in April, state Director of Opioid Initiatives Paul Krupski says the state needs to double down on its efforts to fight the opioid epidemic.

"We're confident that the data pre-pandemic showed us that the steps and the actions we're taking in Wisconsin are creating positive change," he said yesterday during a WisconsinEye interview. "If we stay the course, we continue to invest in those strategies ... We can get pointed in the right direction again."

Wisconsin is expected to get about \$400 million from the \$26 billion settlement with opioid makers and distributors, though Krupski said the exact amount is still uncertain. Thirty percent of the funds will go to the state for efforts to address and prevent abuse of opioids, while the other 70 percent will be divided among local governments, according to a state Department of Justice release.

While the state saw an increase in the number of opioid deaths and overdoses during the pandemic, in line with the national trend, Krupski noted Wisconsin had been starting to see improvements in these figures before COVID-19 reached the state.

"The positive is that, we look at pre-pandemic, we were beginning to see positive outcomes and positive change here in Wisconsin," he said. "We saw our first

significant decrease in opioid-related deaths, and we had seen multiple years of decreasing opioid-related hospitalizations.”

But according to CDC data highlighted by WisconsinEye, opioid deaths in the state increased 12 percent between 2020 and 2021, setting a new record at 21.1 deaths per 100,000 population.

Although Krupski said “no part of the state” is untouched by the opioid epidemic, more deaths and overdoses have been seen in southeastern and south-central Wisconsin. But on a statewide basis, the emergence of fentanyl has led to more suspected overdoses deaths with multiple substances including this powerful opioid, he added.

The Department of Health Services held a dozen listening sessions earlier this year on how the state should use its settlement funds, and Krupski said over 500 people took part. The agency also got feedback through surveys from 325 submissions.

“What we’re doing already is along the lines of what people want to see, and that is really invest across the continuum of care, so in prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery,” he said.

Krupski also pointed to the need for more prevention efforts in K-12 education, as well as more treatment availability and support for housing.

“We know that when we talk about social determinants of health, safe and stable housing for anyone struggling with substance use is so important, so definitely need to look at more ways we can impact housing,” he said.

At the same time, while more treatment options exist in urban areas, Krupski said available services fail to meet the needs of residents. And he said rural areas face their own access issues, as residents may need to drive a long way to find treatment providers.

Watch a video of the interview here:

<https://wiseye.org/2022/03/21/newsmakers-tackling-wisconsins-opioid-crisis/>

See more details on the settlement funds:

<https://www.doj.state.wi.us/news-releases/drug-distributors-and-johnson-johnson-commit-26-billion-opioid-agreement>

-By Alex Moe