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CONTACT: Melissa Wade
Public Health Information Officer
412-578-8312 office
412-339-7995 cell
Melissa.Wade@alleghenycounty.us

Report on Overdose Deaths Identifies Risks and Opportunities for Interventions

PITTSBURGH – Allegheny County has issued a new report on the opioid epidemic through the work of its Health Department (ACHD) and Department of Human Services (DHS). Entitled *Opiate-Related Overdose Deaths in Allegheny County: Risks and Opportunities for Intervention*, the report synthesizes available data sources on opiate overdoses in Allegheny County from 2008 through 2014, and makes recommendations for the public health, human services and criminal justice communities.

“As a county, we must do everything we can to stop this epidemic. We must address it from prevention to treatment, recognizing that addiction is a chronic disease” said Dr. Karen Hacker, Director of the Allegheny County Health Department. “This report and its process has helped us identify where and when to target our efforts.”

The data used for the report came from the DHS Data Warehouse and a variety of other sources, including the Allegheny County Medical Examiner’s Office, hospital emergency departments and Emergency Medical Services. In reviewing the data on opiate-related deaths, researchers found that there are definite high-risk communities that need to be focused on, as well as high-risk periods and known intercept point. Additionally, heroin, not prescription opioids, was increasingly indicated in more recent overdose deaths and, Suboxone and Vivitrol did not directly contribute significantly to overdose deaths.

“The number of deaths from opioid use has more than doubled in the past five years, and this is clearly unacceptable. As a community, we can and should do more,” said Marc Cherna, Director of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services. “This report will allow us to more fully understand all aspects of this epidemic and opportunities for targeted intervention and public education.”

As a result of the research, the report makes a number of recommendations including expanding efforts to ensure that naloxone is available widely, targeting interventions where there are opportunities to reduce overdose risks, and enhancing and expanding medication assisted treatment. Improving the ability of community-based mental health service providers to identify opiate use and overdose risk is also an important part of addressing the epidemic.

Moving forward, ACHD and DHS are committed to utilizing these recommendations as guiding principles:

- Use data to better understand risk factors for opiate overdose in Allegheny County
- Identify opportunities for intervention
- Assess the impact of current strategies in place to save the lives of those at risk of fatal overdose
- Provide recommendations for policymakers and other multi-sector overdose initiatives in the region based on available data

Since 2008, Allegheny County has experienced an increase in opioid related overdoses that culminated in over 240 deaths in 2014. This activity has mirrored the epidemic nationally. In response to the crisis, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and Allegheny County have developed and are implementing a number of plans to reduce opiate-related overdose fatalities including better overdose surveillance, improved healthcare strategies and increased distribution of naloxone.

The report can be found at www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us and www.achd.net.

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KAREN HACKER, MD, MPH, DIRECTOR
ALLEGHENY COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT – PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE
542 FOURTH AVENUE • PITTSBURGH, PA 15219
PHONE (412) 687-ACHD • FAX (412) 578-8325 • WWW.ACHD.NET

