



**Commonwealth of Massachusetts Executive Department
Office of Governor Deval L. Patrick
Press Release**

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**GOVERNOR PATRICK DECLARES PUBLIC HEALTH
EMERGENCY, ANNOUNCES ACTIONS TO ADDRESS
OPIOID ADDICTION EPIDEMIC**

*Dedicates \$20 million to enhance substance abuse treatment programs;
Convenes emergency session of Public Health Council to immediately act
on emergency measures*

BOSTON – Thursday, March 27, 2014 – Governor Deval Patrick today declared a public health emergency in Massachusetts in response to the growing opioid addiction epidemic. The Governor directed the Department of Public Health (DPH) to take several action steps that will combat overdoses, stop the epidemic from getting worse, help those already addicted to recover and map a long-term solution to ending widespread opiate abuse in the Commonwealth.

The use of oxycodone and other narcotic painkillers, often as a route to heroin addiction, has been on the rise for the last few years in Massachusetts. At least 140 people have died from suspected heroin overdoses in communities across the Commonwealth in the last several months, levels previously unseen. From 2000 to 2012, the number of unintentional opiate overdoses increased by 90 percent.

“We have an epidemic of opiate abuse in Massachusetts, so we will treat it like the public health crisis it is,” said Governor Patrick. “I have directed DPH to take certain immediate actions and to give me further actionable recommendations within 60 days, to address this challenge and better protect the health of people suffering from addiction and the families and loved ones who suffer with them.”

The Governor’s Public Health Emergency declaration provides emergency powers to DPH Commissioner Cheryl Bartlett, RN. At the Governor’s direction, Commissioner Bartlett will work with the Public Health Council to take the following actions:

1. Universally permit first responders to carry and administer Naloxone (Narcan), a safe and effective opioid antagonist that, when timely administered, can reverse an overdose and save a life. Naloxone will also be made widely available through standing order prescription in pharmacies in order to provide greater access to family and friends who fear a loved one might overdose.

2. Immediately prohibit the prescribing and dispensing of any hydrocodone-only formulation (commonly known as Zohydro) until determined that adequate measures are in place to safeguard against the potential for diversion, overdose and misuse. The introduction of this new painkiller into the market poses a significant risk to individuals already addicted to opiates and to the public at large.
3. DPH is mandating the use of prescription monitoring by physicians and pharmacies to better safeguard against abuse or misuse. This was previously a voluntary program.
4. Re-task the Commonwealth's Interagency Council on Substance Abuse and Prevention with added members from public health, provider organizations, law enforcement, municipalities and families impacted by the opiate epidemic, to make recommendations in 60 days on further actions that can be taken, including, but not limited to: how to better coordinate services, ensure a full range of treatment regardless of insurance, and how to divert non-violent criminal defendants struggling with addiction into treatment programs.

The Administration will also dedicate an additional \$20 million to increase treatment and recovery services to the general public, to the Department of Corrections and to Sheriffs' Departments.

In conjunction with this public health emergency declaration, Commissioner Bartlett today issued a public health advisory to help education and raise awareness about the treatment options currently available to combat and prevent the spread of opioid addiction.

"These actions will help slow the rise of this dangerous addiction," said Commissioner Bartlett. "Together, these steps will raise awareness in our communities, help save loved ones who tragically fall down from their disease and build important bridges to long-term recovery."

The Governor also announced today that he will partner with other governors and federal stakeholders to develop a regional action plan to bring an end to the opioid epidemic. Earlier this week, the Governor sent letters to Senator Manchin, Congressman Lynch and Secretary Sebelius in support of efforts at the federal level to ban Zohydro Extended Release (ER).

Supportive Statements:

"This epidemic reaches far beyond the addict," said Senate President Therese Murray. "The costs of drug addiction are high, both to families and the economy, and it poses an extreme threat to the safety of our communities. Recognizing the rising levels of drug abuse in the Commonwealth, we have been trying to address the need for treatment beds and services for the past ten years to get ahead of this crisis. The Senate's Special Committee on Drug Abuse and Treatment Options has been working to find how we can address this difficult and life-threatening problem and I want to thank the

Governor and the Department of Public Health for their dedication to finding a solution. In addition to these steps, it is critical that we put in place an education program in elementary schools, similar to the anti-smoking program, so all students are aware of the dangers and effects of addiction by the time they get to middle school. The age of those who are using and overdosing keeps getting younger and by the time they reach high school it is already too late. It is our responsibility to get ahead of addiction and provide residents with the resources to lead drug-free, independent lives.”

"In my role as Chair of the Special Senate Committee on Drug Abuse and Treatment Options, I have met with and heard from countless people with a heart wrenching story to tell," said Senator Jen Flanagan. "I am thankful that the Governor is putting much needed resources into this epidemic. As the Senate Committee continues to travel throughout the Commonwealth to hear from those on the front line, as well as affected families; we are eager to work with the Governor's office and others to enhance the availability treatment options in Massachusetts."

"The steps taken today reinforce that we must renew our focus on prevention – preventing people from starting down the path to addiction by appropriately limiting the prescribing of opiates, preventing deaths through the use of Narcan, and preventing people from being denied treatment because of a lack of programs and lack of insurance coverage," said Senator John Keenan "We have a number of bills making their way through the legislative process that will further enhance these efforts, and together we'll continue our fight to end this epidemic."

"We truly are in a state of emergency when it comes to opiate addiction, and the Commonwealth has had to do a lot with limited resources," said Representative Liz Malia. "Expanding services will fill some of the existing gaps in the system and allow those in need to access treatment in real time – when they need it and in the most appropriate setting."

"Those of us who have spent our careers working in the addiction treatment field have never experienced anything that approaches the current opiate abuse epidemic," said Chuck Faris, CEO of Spectrum Health Systems. "The pain inflicted on families, the increase in crime and the loss of lives is unprecedented. We applaud the Governor for his leadership on this public health challenge. We look forward to his decisive action that will save lives and protect the public."

"On March 26, I was invited to sit with other parents and family members to share experiences of our loved ones' addictions with Governor Patrick and his Administration. I left there with guarded optimism," said Paul Doherty. "His response today is beyond anything I had anticipated or I could have hoped for. I applaud Governor Patrick's quick response to this crisis. Having Governor Patrick recognize the urgency of this epidemic will bring attention and necessary resources to help those who are directly affected by the disease of addiction as well as those who have dedicated their lives to helping those who suffer from this disease."

“I know I speak for each and every one of the over 5,000 members of Learn To Cope, families who struggle every day in finding resources, treatment and hope for our loved ones and all of the families who have lost loved ones to overdose, when I say today we have hope that Governor Patrick, who has heard our concerns and, manning all of the resources at the state's disposal, we are moving forward with solutions to the horrendous epidemic of opiate addiction that is ravaging our Commonwealth and the nation,” said Mary D’Eramo, of Learn to Cope.

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