

# There is no vaccine for the opioid epidemic

**By Mike Moore and David Trone**

For the past year, our nation has been focused on fighting the coronavirus. Rightly so. Today, hope in the form of a vaccine vial is reaching individuals and communities across the country. But no vaccine for the opioid epidemic is coming. It's the crisis raging in the background, with opioid deaths surging over the past year as economic opportunities, isolation and mental health declined amid COVID-19. More than half a million people have died from opioid overdose since 1999, and more than 800,000 from drug overdoses of any kind.

Fighting this crisis requires emergency services to prevent the loss of life, treatment, education and prevention so people do not become addicted in the first place. With bold leadership from states, including states' attorneys general and urgent funding from Congress, we can do it.

President Joe Biden recently pledged to take action on opioids. He called it a national crisis, and that's true. But for our families, it's also personal. We each know what it's like through a nephew's experience, one of whom is still struggling with addiction and the other who tragically lost his life to this disease.

The pandemic has dangerously exacerbated the opioid crisis. COVID-19 has left people isolated, stressed and depressed, all triggers that can contribute to individuals using substances like opioids. While access to treatment via telehealth has increased for some, for others, treatment options that were already too costly and difficult to get before the pandemic have become even harder to find.

The growing toll of these effects is clear. In Allegany County, for example, opioid-involved overdose deaths have increased by as much as 111%. Most recently, CDC data shows that overdoses throughout Maryland increased by 18.7%, while Western Maryland experienced a 45.9% increase in overdose deaths compared to 2019. It's the same story all over the country. The Centers for Disease Control totaled more than 87,000 drug overdose deaths in the 12 months ending in September of last year. That's the highest ever recorded in a single 12-month period.

To help solve this worsening crisis, several things need to happen immediately. Congress must dedicate long-term funding for treatment and for emergency medical services like naloxone. Groups like the Freshmen Working Group on Addiction and the Bipartisan Opioid Task Force are working on policies that would do this. For instance, the State Opioid Response Grant Authorization Act would provide \$9 billion over six years to respond to the opioid epidemic. Efforts to increase funding for mental health and substance use disorder in COVID-19 stimulus packages has also received bipartisan, bicameral support.

Prevention is also foundational if we're ever to be successful in beating this epidemic. One way to immediately fund a prevention and education campaign is through settlements. Over the past several years, opioid manufacturers, distributors and other companies have lost in court and been held accountable for their role in fueling opioid addiction. Part of the money from these and future settlements should be dedicated to prevention and education to break down the social stigma of this disease, in addition to government funding for a comprehensive solution to end the opioid crisis.

We know prevention campaigns can work. We've done it before and continue to do it at Truth Initiative, which was born out of tobacco settlements in the 1990s. The resulting anti-tobacco public education campaign helped cut the rate of smoking among young people by 80% since 2000.

The same kind of results are possible by applying similar efforts to the opioid crisis. Truth Initiative has already begun this work in test markets with "The Truth About Opioids" campaign, targeting young people who are especially vulnerable to misunderstanding the risks associated with opioids. We documented shifts in young people's knowledge and attitudes about the dangers of using opioids other than prescribed. We saw a 36% increase in those who strongly agreed that anyone can become addicted to prescription opioids. After seeing the ads, young people were 600% more likely to seek out information on the opioid epidemic and the campaign's tagline "know the truth." These are promising results, but this kind of work needs to happen on a much larger scale.

Prevention and education efforts can't be sporadic or an afterthought. State leaders across the nation must join together immediately and commit to a comprehensive, nationwide prevention and education campaign that is cost-efficient for the states and can be implemented right away.

For too long, the opioid epidemic was cast into the shadows, as few leaders talked about addiction and overdose. Today, it has been overshadowed and exacerbated by COVID-19. We need more leaders to bring a spotlight to this struggle, powered by long-term investment and planning to finally solve it.

That's the only way to inoculate ourselves from the lethal grip of this crisis.

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