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Assessing Maryland’s Response to the Opioid Crisis

ROCKVILLE, MD (APRIL 6, 2017) — A public health-minded approach to Maryland’s opioid crisis is more likely to produce positive results than a “War on Drugs” approach, according to a new study from the Maryland Public Policy Institute. Given the tragic toll heroin and prescription opioids are taking in Maryland and across the country, the Institute analyzed Maryland’s evolving strategy to combat this epidemic and found both strengths and weaknesses. The full report can be viewed at mdpolicy.org.

Maryland saw a 62 percent increase in the number opioid overdose deaths through the third quarter of 2016. In Harford County, deaths have spiked 185 percent. The study credits Maryland policymakers for taking key policy steps since 2015, including:

- Increasing the number of patients that a physician qualified to prescribe buprenorphine can treat. Buprenorphine is a class of prescription opioid used to treat opioid addiction.
- Replacing Suboxone Film on the Medicaid preferred drug list in 2016 with Zubsolv, a more efficient and less easily smuggled buprenorphine/naloxone tablet. After this change, Maryland’s Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services reported “a decline in comparison to last year’s figures” of Suboxone Film smuggling, which it described as “by far the most prevalent form of contraband found in Maryland State Correctional Facilities.”
- New funding to support those struggling with opioid addiction, mental health, and substance use disorders.

The study questions the effectiveness of two recent proposals:

- The Distribution of Opioids Resulting in Death Act, which institutes new felony charge for selling opioids that result in the death of a user, would not succeed at reducing drug abuse or illegal sales, but would succeed at filling prisons.
- The Prescriber Limits Act, which would prevent more than seven days’ worth of opioid painkillers from being prescribed during a patient’s first visit, would interfere in medical practice, serving only to reduce access to those in need while failing to significantly impact drug abuse.

“When there is widespread agreement among the political and chattering classes that drastic action is needed, it is usually necessary to take a step back and carefully consider the evidence,” said Andrew F. Quinlan, co-author of the study. “That is where we believe our paper can come in handy. Otherwise, they are as likely to make the problem worse as better.”

“If opioid abuse is treated as just the latest iteration of the War on Drugs, then history shows that there is going to be a lot of collateral damage and little in the way of improvements for the foreseeable future,” said Brian Garst, study co-author. “Policymakers need to get creative and look at what actually works, instead of just what plays well on the evening news.”

About the Maryland Public Policy Institute: Founded in 2001, the Maryland Public Policy Institute is a nonpartisan public policy research and education organization that focuses on state policy issues. The Institute’s mission is to formulate and promote public policies at all levels of government based on principles of free enterprise, limited government, and civil society. Learn more at mdpolicy.org.

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