

Ventura County Grand Jury 2017 - 2018



Final Report

The Opioid Crisis in Ventura County

April 19, 2018

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The Opioid Crisis in Ventura County

Summary

The 2017-2018 Ventura County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) investigated the abuse of prescription drugs and heroin in Ventura County (County). The Ventura County Behavioral Health Department (VCBH), a component of the Ventura County Health Care Agency, is tasked with addressing the opioid crisis. VCBH provides prevention and treatment services through the Alcohol and Drug Prevention Program (ADP) and its subprograms.

The Grand Jury concluded ADP allocates a disproportionate amount of budget resources to treatment programs, as opposed to prevention programs. Additionally, prevention program efforts primarily focus on marijuana and alcohol abuse, with minimal attention to opioid abuse.

The Grand Jury also concluded that the Narcotics Treatment subprogram is overly reliant on contracts with for-profit entities, which generally have fewer cost-control incentives.

The Grand Jury concluded that reports of deaths due to opioid abuse do not consistently use a standard definition of what is considered to be an opioid. The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH and County partners agree upon a standard definition of opioids when reporting the number of deaths resulting from opioid abuse.

The Grand Jury also concluded VCBH's use of several different reporting systems results in confusing and inconsistent data that does not present a clear picture of program successes or areas needing improvement. The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH standardize the reporting of outcomes of opioid abuse prevention and treatment programs to more accurately measure the success and efficiency of service delivery.

The Grand Jury recommends VCBH consider re-allocating existing resources to opioid abuse prevention programs.

Background

According to data from the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), drug overdoses have surpassed motor vehicle and firearm fatalities as the leading cause of injury deaths in America. Opioid overdoses kill nearly five people every hour in the U.S. (Ref-04)

Ventura County is not immune to the spread of the opioid crisis. The Ventura County Medical Examiner's Office noted that between 2008 and 2014 prescription drugs accounted for the most overdose deaths [63%], far above deaths caused by other substance abuse categories such as alcohol, heroin, and marijuana.

After reviewing reports issued by the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department (VCBH) concerning opioid abuse, the Grand Jury investigated the abuse of prescription drugs and heroin in Ventura County. The Grand Jury was specifically interested in what the County of Ventura (County) was doing to address the issue of opioid abuse. (Ref-01, Ref-02)

The lead department tasked with addressing this issue is VCBH. This department provides prevention and treatment services through the Alcohol and Drug Prevention Program (ADP) and its subprograms.

The Narcotics Treatment Program, a subprogram of ADP, provides residential and non-residential treatment services to people with narcotics addiction problems. The Prevention Services Program, another subprogram of ADP, is focused on discouraging the use of alcohol and marijuana among teens.

The Ventura County Board of Supervisors (BOS) voted in June 2016 to appropriate an additional \$1.9 million to ADP to address substance abuse, including opioid abuse.

Methodology

The Grand Jury reviewed VCBH budget documents to determine the amount of funding, costs, and staffing directly addressing opioid abuse problems. The Grand Jury obtained and studied Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup marketing materials and other agency-generated public information. The Grand Jury performed extensive internet research, focusing on media reports on the opioid epidemic, both locally and nationally. The Grand Jury also conducted interviews with VCBH staff.

Facts

- FA-01.** One in five County teens has abused prescription drugs. Over 50% of teens get them for free from friends and family. Seventy-three percent of County residents surveyed indicated that prescription drugs, for non-prescribed purposes, are “fairly easy” or “very easy” for teens to obtain. (Ref-01, Ref-02)
- FA-02.** The number of opioid deaths in 2013 was reported as 78 prescription drug deaths and 30 heroin deaths for a total of 108 opioid-related deaths. A report published in August 2017 by the Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup stated the group’s primary goal was to “decrease fatal opioid overdoses by 50% in the County from the 2013 baseline of reported opioid overdoses.” (Ref-01, Ref-02)
- FA-03.** The same report stated that the majority of overdose deaths from all causes [alcohol, marijuana, heroin, and prescription drugs] between 2008 and 2014 involved either heroin or prescription drugs. (Ref-01, Ref-02)

- FA-04.** The Prevention Services subprogram has the smallest budget, at \$2.4 million. The Narcotics Treatment subprogram has the largest budget, at \$7.1 million in 2017-2018. (Ref-03)
- FA-05.** The Narcotics Treatment Program has no assigned County staff. Services are delivered entirely by contractors who are primarily for-profit entities. (Ref-03)
- FA-06.** VCBH collects and submits patient outcome data to two State-level organizations:
- The California Department of Health Care Services for billing and audit information pertaining to Medi-Cal reimbursements to County contractors
 - The California Outcomes Measurement System, a data collection system used in all 58 counties containing patient treatment outcome data
- FA-07.** The County has an internal data collection system named AVATAR. This system stores the electronic medical records of all VCBH patients including:
- Days in hospital and/or jail
 - Types and times of service
 - Levels of impairment at the time of intake compared to levels at the time of release
- FA-08.** The Grand Jury discovered most documents describing opioid-related deaths used inconsistent terms. The reports used different definitions of the term “opioids,” some referred to prescription drugs only, some to heroin only, and some to both. (Ref-01, Ref-02)

Conclusions

- C-01.** The Grand Jury concluded opioid-related deaths and opioid abuse in general are growing problems in the County. (FA-01, FA-02, FA-03)
- C-02.** The Grand Jury concluded ADP allocates a disproportionate amount of budget resources to treatment programs, as opposed to prevention programs. Prevention program efforts primarily focus on marijuana and alcohol abuse, with minimal attention to opioid abuse. (FA-04)
- C-03.** The Grand Jury concluded the Narcotics Treatment subprogram is overly reliant on contracts with for-profit entities, two of which account for 61% of all ADP contract expenditures. For-profit entities generally have fewer cost-control incentives. (FA-05)
- C-04.** The Grand Jury concluded the use of several different reporting systems results in confusing and inconsistent data that does not present a clear representation of program successes or areas needing improvement. (FA-06, FA-07)

- C-05.** The Grand Jury concluded that reports of deaths due to opioid abuse do not consistently use a standard definition of what is considered to be an opioid. (FA-08)

Recommendations

- R-01.** The Grand Jury recommends VCBH consider re-allocating existing resources to opioid abuse prevention programs. (C-01, C-02)
- R-02.** The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH include significantly more information about the danger of opioid abuse in its prevention programs. (C-02)
- R-03.** The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH evaluate whether County staff or non-profit entities could provide more cost-effective treatment programs than for-profit entities. (C-03)
- R-04.** The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH standardize the reporting of outcomes of opioid abuse prevention and treatment programs to more accurately measure the success and efficiency of service delivery. (C-04)
- R-05.** The Grand Jury recommends that VCBH and County partners agree upon a standard definition of opioids when reporting the number of deaths resulting from opioid abuse. (C-05)

Responses

Responses Required From:

Ventura County Board of Supervisors, (C-01, C-02, C-03, C-04, C-05, R-01, R-02, R-03, R-04, R-05)

Responses Requested From:

Ventura County Behavioral Health, Department of Ventura County Health Care Agency, (C-01, C-02, C-03, C-04, C-05, R-01, R-02, R-03, R-04, R-05)

References

- Ref-01.** Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup. Reducing Supply, Saving Lives, Reducing Demand, Issue 2 August 2017.
http://venturacountylimits.org/resource_documents/Reducing-Rx-Saving-Lives-FNL.pdf

Accessed April 17, 2018

- Ref-02.** Hunnicutt, K. L. (2017). Overdose deaths in Ventura County: 2008-2014. Oxnard, CA: Ventura County Behavioral Health, Rx Drug & Heroin Workgroup
http://venturacountylimits.org/resource_documents/Drug-Related-Deaths-Issue-Briefing-FNL.pdf

Accessed April 17, 2018

Ref-03. County of Ventura, County Executive Office. Fiscal Year 2017-18 Adopted Budget.
[https://vcportal.ventura.org/CEO/docs/publications/FY2017-18 Adopted Budget.pdf](https://vcportal.ventura.org/CEO/docs/publications/FY2017-18_Adopted_Budget.pdf)

Accessed April 17, 2018

Ref-04. Reynolds, Dean. CBS News. CDC: Opioid Overdoses Kill Almost 5 People Every Hour in the U.S. March 6, 2018.
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/report-finds-opioid-overdoses-up-30-percent-in-45-states/>

Accessed April 17, 2018

Glossary

TERM

DEFINITION

ADP	Alcohol and Drug Prevention Program
BOS	Ventura County Board of Supervisors
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
County	County of Ventura
Grand Jury	The 2017-2018 Ventura County Grand Jury
VCBH	Ventura County Behavioral Health