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FOR INFORMATION CALL

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Analysis of 888 local heroin and opiate overdose deaths yields eye-opening results

Mapping and demographic data demonstrate unexpected “hot-spots,” ubiquity of overdose epidemic across racial and ethnic lines

The epidemic of overdose deaths tied to heroin and opioid abuse is sweeping across demographic and geographic boundaries, according to an analysis of data from the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner by the office of **Common Council President Michael J. Murphy**, and it defies conventional expectations about where drug problems occur and who is affected.

“All too often, people assume that drug abuse is not a problem that could ever impact their lives and their families,” President Murphy said. “But when you crunch the numbers and chart them on a map, you see that this isn’t just an isolated phenomenon. Every neighborhood in every city and every suburb is at risk, and unless we work together across jurisdictions to address this epidemic, the problem will continue to grow.”

Eight hundred eighty-eight (888) people died from drug overdoses in Milwaukee County from 2012 through 2015. The report, *888 Bodies and Counting* (attached), breaks down the deaths by the age, gender and race of the victims. It found that white residents were most likely to die from a drug overdose between the ages of 20 and 29, while the risk spiked for black residents between the ages of 40 and 59. Men accounted for 61 percent of overdose deaths.

Caucasians far outpaced any other racial or ethnic group, making up 67 percent of the overdose deaths. Black residents accounted for 24 percent of the overdose deaths, and Hispanics represented just six percent of the fatalities.

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Overdose analysis/ADD ONE

The crisis does not seem to be constrained by any geographic or political boundaries. A heat map of overdose frequency shows “hot-spots” in Milwaukee neighborhoods that include all corners of the city, as well as suburbs including West Allis, St. Francis, Cudahy, South Milwaukee, Shorewood, Wauwatosa and Glendale. At least several overdose deaths were reported in almost every local municipality.

Also concerning, President Murphy said, is the very recent rise in the prevalence of the drug fentanyl in the toxicology results of overdose victims. The occurrence of the drug in test results rose more than five-fold between 2012 and 2015.

While heroin was most likely to be present in the toxicology results of white overdose victims, cocaine was the drug most frequently found in black victims.

And while many drug education efforts have been targeted at young people, the analysis shows that nearly half of Milwaukee County overdoses are occurring in victims between the ages of 30 and 59. The average age of local overdose victims is 43.

“In order for our efforts to have a measurable impact in the community, we need to look at what the data are telling us and tailor public policy to the population that we need to be targeting,” President Murphy said. “I want to thank the medical examiner’s office for sharing these data with us, and my office staff as well for their exhaustive work in fleshing it all out in this report. I hope these efforts can prove critical in preventing more of these needless deaths.”

President Murphy said that he plans to use the report this spring to guide an upcoming partnership with the medical community that will take a more comprehensive view of the addiction and the overdose epidemic in pursuit of concrete policy recommendations. More official action is needed, he said, to counteract the trend of climbing overdose-related deaths.

Between 2005 and 2014, heroin-related deaths rose 495 percent in Milwaukee County.

“Every one of these 888 deaths represents a local family that has been torn apart by the heroin and opioid epidemic,” President Murphy said. “The scale of that grief is hard to comprehend, and it touches every one of us in some way.”

“Heroin and opioid addiction is nothing short of a public health crisis,” he said, “and if we don’t act now, it will only continue to claim more lives.”