

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 19, 2017

Contact: Kate Burkhart, 907-465-4667, kate.burkhart@alaska.gov

Rebecca Lynch, 907-269-3495, rebecca.lynch@alaska.gov

Task Force recommends collaborative prevention, treatment and recovery support strategies to reduce opioid misuse in Alaska

The [Alaska Opioid Policy Task Force](#) has issued a broad set of recommendations to prevent, treat, and support recovery from opioid misuse and addiction in Alaska, as mentioned in Governor Bill Walker's State of the State address last night.

The task force is a partnership of the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, and Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, together with 20 volunteer members representing stakeholder groups statewide. Task Force members included people in recovery and family members, health care providers, law enforcement officers, rural and Alaska Native representatives, state and local elected officials, and others. The task force began in May and met 11 times over six months to hear from state and national experts and Alaskans statewide.

The task force based its work on the science of opioid addiction and how opioids affect the brain and body.

"We can't beat this epidemic with fear and stigma. We must follow the science. Addiction is a disease with real medical consequences to the brain, so our solutions must also be medical in nature. We enlisted Alaskan experts in the field to help guide this process to be sure that the recommendations are based on the best information and will work for Alaska," said co-chair Gunnar Ebbesson.

The recommendations follow a public health framework for addressing substance misuse and addictions promoted by the national Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO).

"The public health framework provides a three-level approach to preventing adverse health effects of substance misuse: saving lives now through harm reduction, removing barriers to treatment, and addressing the drivers of self-medication and the flood of opioids in our communities," said Alaska Chief Medical Officer Jay Butler, MD, co-chair of the task force and current president of ASTHO.

Strategies recommended by the task force include:

- Reduce and control access to opioids through prescribing guidelines, use of the state's prescription monitoring program, medication take-back events, and promotion of effective and safe pain management options.
- Reduce the risk of opioid misuse by promoting healthy childhood development through parent-support programs and developmental screening, school-based prevention, and improved nutrition.
- Treat opioid addiction as a chronic disease, remove the stigma of addiction, expand integration of behavioral health and primary health care, and make treatment options available as close to home as possible.
- Train health care, law enforcement, and community social service professionals to better recognize and prevent opioid misuse and make referrals to treatment.
- Provide access to and education about naloxone (also known as Narcan®) statewide. Naloxone is a life-saving medication that anyone can use to treat an opioid overdose.
- Increase the likelihood of long-term recovery by increasing access to treatment, recovery supports, and programs to assist with housing, education, employment etc.

"We learned a lot from the experts who presented to the task force and from the members of the public who shared their experiences and ideas with us. These recommendations are truly an Alaskan response to how the opioid epidemic is affecting our communities," said co-chair Jeff Jessee.

The meeting notes and final policy recommendations are available at <http://dhss.alaska.gov/AKOpioidTaskForce/>.