



STATE OF MARYLAND

DHMH

Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

201 West Preston Street • Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Martin O'Malley, Governor – Anthony G. Brown, Lt. Governor – Joshua M. Sharfstein, M.D., Secretary

December 7, 2012

Memorandum

To: Lori Brewster, Health Officer, Wicomico County Health Department
Heather Brown, Director, Addictions Department and Core Service Agency, Wicomico County Health Department

From: Gayle Jordan-Randolph, MD, Deputy Secretary for Behavioral Health and Disabilities, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
Kathleen Rebbert-Franklin, Acting Director, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Administration

RE: Shift from Prescription Opioid to Heroin Involvement in Drug Overdose Deaths

The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene has become aware of a statewide trend of increasing numbers of heroin-related overdose deaths. During the first seven months of 2012 there were 41% more heroin-related deaths than during the same span in 2011. This increase has occurred simultaneously with a 15% decrease in overdose deaths related to prescription opioids. The Department is also tracking an uptick in heroin-related admissions to publicly funded substance use disorder treatment programs in Maryland. Admissions involving abuse of prescription opioids, which increased over 125% in the last five fiscal years, now show signs of leveling off.

In a breakout of heroin-related overdose deaths by Maryland subdivision, Wicomico County was identified as one of the jurisdictions experiencing a significant increase in 2012. From January to July of this year, there were 400% more heroin-related deaths in the County than there were during the first seven months of 2012; prescription opioid-related deaths declined by 50%. In Maryland's Eastern Shore Region (which includes Cecil County, Charles County, Queen Anne's County, Caroline County, Talbot County, Dorchester County, Wicomico County, Somerset County and Worcester County), heroin-related deaths increased 80% and prescription opioid-related deaths declined 36%. A detailed breakdown of all opioid related deaths in Wicomico County is presented in the table below.

Drug Overdose Deaths¹

	Wicomico County			Statewide		
	Jan.-Jul. 2011	Jan.-Jul. 2012	% Change	Jan.-Jul. 2011	Jan.-Jul. 2012	% Change
Drug Involvement						
Total Drug-Related	5	8	60.0	365	385	5.5
Total Opioid-Related ²	5	7	40.0	307	334	8.8
Total Rx Opioid-Related	4	2	-50.0	208	177	-14.9
Total Heroin-Related	1	5	400.0	145	205	41.4
Age Range:						
Heroin-Related						
15-24	0	1	*	17	26	52.9
25-34	0	1	*	39	45	15.4
35-44	0	1	*	27	43	59.3
45-54	1	2	100.0	43	63	46.5
55-64	0	1	*	18	25	38.9
65+	0	0	*	1	3	200.0
Race/Ethnicity:						
Heroin-Related						
White	1	4	300.0	103	146	41.7
Black	0	1	*	37	53	43.2
Hispanic ³	0	0	*	4	2	-50.0
Other	0	0	*	1	4	300.0
Gender:						
Heroin-Related						
Male	1	4	300.0	110	154	40.0
Female	0	1	*	35	51	45.7

¹All overdose death figures were calculated using data from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. The methodology used to calculate overdose death figures was developed by the Vital Statistics Administration and is available online here: <http://dhmh.maryland.gov/vsa/Documents/Methods--drug-report.pdf>. Drug overdose deaths are assigned to jurisdictions based on the location of death. This may differ from the location where the overdose occurred.

²Since a death may be associated with both heroin and prescription opioids, the sum of the number of prescription opioid deaths and the number of heroin deaths is greater than the overall number of opioid-related deaths.

³Individuals of Hispanic origin may be any race.

Both anecdotal and empirical evidence provided by public health authorities, law enforcement and researchers within Maryland and across the country suggest prescription-opioid abuse may be serving as a path to heroin abuse. For individuals that have developed addiction through the abuse of prescription opioids, heroin often provides a relatively cheap, potent and accessible alternative when pharmaceuticals become too expensive or difficult to obtain. Public health and safety authorities have implemented measures to limit access to prescription opioids for non-medical use by reducing inappropriate prescribing and dispensing of controlled substances and educating the public about the dangers of using these drugs without a legitimate prescription. Although these efforts appear to be having an impact on prescription opioid-related overdose deaths, the recent increase in heroin-related deaths presents a serious threat to public health and safety.

Reducing drug-induced deaths is a major public health goal of Maryland's State Health Improvement Process (SHIP). To support this process, the Department is conducting direct outreach to Maryland physicians to notify them of the trend and provide resources to improve their ability to identify patients with opioid-related substance use disorders and make referrals to the treatment and recovery system. The Department will also support jurisdictions' development of community-based overdose prevention plans that are tailored to local needs. More information on this initiative will be forthcoming within several weeks.

If you have any questions, please contact Michael Baier, Prescription Drug Monitoring Program Coordinator, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Administration, at 410-402-8643 or michael.baier@maryland.gov.