



“Committed Service and Responsiveness”

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For Immediate Release

Chester County Coroner’s Office Reports Increase in Fatal Drug Overdoses in 2017

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The Chester County Coroner’s Office has released data on deaths due to drug overdose in Chester County in 2017. A total of 141 people died of a drug overdose, with 133 deaths determined to be accidental and 8 due to suicide. This represents a 35.7% increase in accidental drug overdoses compared to 2016. These numbers may increase slightly as final tests are pending in a few cases.

Cause of Death	2016	2017
Drug Overdose - All	106	141
Drug Overdose - Accidental	98	133
Drug Overdose - Suicide	8	8

All available 2017 drug overdose fatalities and associate demographic and toxicology data have now been reported to overdosefreepa and can be viewed at that site. Analysis of the Chester County data shows that there was little change with regard to the gender and race of those dying of overdoses: The affected population remains predominantly male (73%) and white (90.2%). There has been, however, an age shift towards younger victims. This was due largely to a greater proportion of deaths in those aged 25-34 in 2017 (34.8%) than in 2016 (26.5%). Deaths in 18-24 year-olds showed a slight increase, from 10.4% to 11.3%.

Toxicological testing performed as part of the Coroner’s office death investigations showed a dramatic jump in illicit synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, in 2017. Fentanyl was present in almost 72% of deaths in 2017 compared with 43% in 2016. Pennsylvania was recently identified as one of a handful of states with a [dramatic increase in overdose deaths](#) in recent

years. This increase is attributed largely to the surge in fentanyl availability here compared to some other states.

Christina VandePol, M.D., Chester County's new Coroner, stated "As prescription opioid prescribing comes under control and unused prescription drugs are removed from circulation through medication collection programs, those who had become addicted to them often turned to heroin. Heroin is now being replaced or mixed with much more potent drugs like fentanyl, resulting in overdose and death due to respiratory depression. Besides continuing our prevention efforts and naloxone rescues, what we need now is an increased emphasis on medication-assisted treatment. Along with that, we need non-narcotic alternatives to opioids for management of chronic pain and post-surgical pain."

The Chester County Coroner's Office recently received a \$10,000 state grant to support enhanced toxicological testing and expedited reporting of opioid overdose deaths. This grant is part of a national Center for Disease Control (CDC) program which recognizes that coroners' and medical examiners' offices nationwide are the primary source of drug overdose data. The scope of the epidemic has stretched the resources of many of these offices, including the Chester County Coroner's Office. The staff, budget, and resources of the Coroner's Office have remained level in the face of a nearly 80% increase in the number of accidental drug overdoses from 2015 to 2017. The grant funds will be a big help in defraying ever-increasing toxicological test costs for drugs of abuse.

The staff of the Coroner's Office remains committed to honoring the victims and families affected this epidemic by thoroughly investigating overdose deaths. It is also our responsibility to communicate that information in a timely fashion so that Chester County and the broader public health community have accurate and current data to guide existing and future policies and programs to mitigate this ongoing crisis.

Approved for Release

Christina VandePol, M.D.