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“Committed Service and
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**Chester County Coroner’s Office 2020 Mid-Year Report on Fatal
Drug Overdoses**

Photo caption: Syringe used to inject illicit drugs

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The Chester County Coroner’s Office is releasing data on drug overdose deaths in Chester County from January 1, 2020 through June 30, 2020. A total of 58 deaths have been confirmed to be due to an accidental drug overdose. This is fewer than the 68 overdose deaths reported mid-way through 2019, but the Coroner’s Office cautioned that it is not possible to accurately predict a total for all of 2020. In 2019, for example, the second half of the year saw a drop in overdose deaths so the total for the year was 105 deaths.

There have been news reports of surges in drug overdose deaths elsewhere in the state during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that trend has not been observed so far in Chester County. The Pennsylvania Department of Health has no 2020 drug death data on their website at this time.

The demographic profile of those who have died of an accidental drug overdose so far in 2020 has shifted compared to previous years. While the affected population remains predominantly male (82%) and white (80%), almost half of overdose deaths this year have been in those over age 45. By comparison, for all of 2019, only 31% of deaths were in those over age 45. The oldest person dying of a drug overdose so far in 2020 was in their 70’s.

“We are no longer surprised to find that someone in their 50’s, 60’s, or 70’s died of an overdose,” said Chester County Coroner Dr. Christina VandePol. “Many of the older decedents had a long history of substance abuse, often decades, and it was not always suspected or identified by their health care providers, if and when they sought help for other problems. It’s also clear that addiction ravaged many of these lives over time, resulting in homelessness, unemployment, and estrangement from family. Another observation is that alcoholism was a common co-existing or pre-existing condition in this population. I will be sharing our findings with the Chester County Overdose Prevention Task Force. I believe a customized approach is needed to reach this older demographic.”

Toxicological tests showed that fentanyl, a synthetic opioid found in approximately 78% of 2020 deaths, remained the predominant drug responsible for overdose deaths in

Chester County. Most fatalities involve multiple drugs, both illicit and prescription. A new finding is that methamphetamine has replaced heroin as the second most common drug found in overdose deaths. Methamphetamine was present in 30% of cases so far in 2020, compared to about 18% in all of 2019. Xylazine, a large animal anesthetic presumably used as a cheap adulterant, was the third most common substance found. It was present in 28% of cases, always in combination with other drugs, usually including fentanyl. The Coroner's Office issued a statement about xylazine when it first appeared in Chester County overdose deaths early in 2019 and it has steadily increased since then.

Approved for Release

Christina VandePol, M.D.