

Obama to announce federal push to fight heroin use

October 21 2015, by Kathleen Hennessey

Heading to a region grappling with the scourge of drug abuse, President Barack Obama planned to announce new steps to improve doctor training and ease access to drug treatment as part of an effort to help communities battling "epidemic" heroin and prescription painkiller abuse, White House officials said Wednesday.

Obama planned to detail the moves, along with a new public awareness campaign, on a day trip to Charleston, West Virginia. He was due to meet with law enforcement officials, drug counselors and advocates at a community center to show "a sense of urgency that we at the federal level can do more to address this issue," Michael Botticelli, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, told reporters.

West Virginia has the highest rate of overdose deaths in the U.S.—more than twice the national average, according to a report by the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

State officials say the problem is damaging the economy, depressing the workforce and overwhelming social services.

Officials stressed the problem is a national one. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report released in July found the number of people who reported using heroin within the past year had nearly doubled from 2002 to 2013. Heroin use was up among nearly all demographic groups, but showed particular spikes among women and non-Latino whites.

Researchers say two factors are driving the trend: the rise in abuse of opioid painkillers—drugs that are often a precursor to heroin—and the increasing availability of cheap heroin.

Researchers found that most users reported using at least one other drug in combination with heroin, a factor that contributes to high overdose rates. Between 2002 and 2013, the rate of heroin-related [overdose deaths](#) nearly quadrupled, and more than 8,200 people—by some estimates, one in every 50 addicts—died in 2013, according to the CDC.

"We cannot separate the heroin epidemic from the prescription drug epidemic," Botticelli said. "Dealing with the heroin epidemic really compels us to deal with heroin drug use issues."

Botticelli said too few prescription drug health care providers are properly trained in safely prescribing painkillers, while access to medication-assisted treatment for addicts is too difficult.

Obama's visit comes as politicians are grasping for a policy response. But with a budget stalemate in Congress, Obama had only modest initiatives to offer.

Before departing the White House, Obama ordered federal agencies that employ [health care providers](#) to offer training on prescribing painkillers. He also ordered them to review their health care insurance plans and address policies that might prevent patients from receiving medication as part of their treatment.

The administration has said it wants to expand access to Suboxone, a drug that can ease the transition off other opioids. It also has pushed to expand availability of naloxone, a drug that can reverse overdose.

On Wednesday, the White House announced commitments from the

Fraternal Order of Police to expand training on the use of naloxone. Several pharmacy chains, including CVS and RiteAid, have also agreed to expand accessibility of the drug.

Obama also planned to highlight a new public awareness campaign. CBS, Turner Broadcasting, ABC, The New York Times and Google, have committed more than \$20 million in advertising space to run public service announcements.

Presidential candidates in both parties also have put forward proposals—a response, in part, to the frequent concerns raised in New Hampshire town halls.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has laid out a \$10 billion plan that promotes treatment over incarceration.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie repeatedly visited drug rehabilitation centers and talked up his work in his state to create [drug](#) courts that mandate treatment over jail time for non-violent offenders.

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