

Obama highlights nation's growing opioid problem

March 29 2016, by Kevin Freking



President Barack Obama is greeted by Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., and Fulton County, Ga. Chairman John Eaves upon his arrival on Air Force One to Atlanta, Tuesday, March 29, 2016, where he will speak at the National Rx Drug Abuse & Heroin Summit in Atlanta. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

The Obama administration issued a proposed rule Tuesday that aims to increase medication-based treatment for tens of thousands of people

addicted to opioids, and the White House called for lawmakers to dedicate more resources to fighting the growing problem.

The proposed rule, along with a commitment from 60 medical schools to heighten training for prescribing opioids, coincides with President Barack Obama's visit to Atlanta to participate in a panel discussion moderated by Dr. Sanjay Gupta at the National Rx Drug Abuse & Heroin Summit.

Opioids are highly addictive drugs that include both prescription painkillers like codeine and morphine, as well as illegal narcotics, primarily heroin. Deaths linked to opioids soared to more than 29,000 in 2014, the highest number on record.

Congress is attempting to allocate more resources to confront the problem - one of few areas where lawmakers from both parties might reach agreement during the election year. But the White House is critical of a Senate bill it says lacks critical funding. Obama is seeking \$1.1 billion in new federal funds to expand treatment for opioid addiction, which is about triple current levels.

"We've paid enough lip service to this issue," White House spokesman Josh Earnest told reporters as Obama flew to Atlanta. "It's time for Republicans to follow the president's lead in demonstrating some kind of commitment to actually taking action that will have an impact."



President Barack Obama greets a crowd on the tarmac after arriving on Air Force One at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport Tuesday, March 29, 2016, in Atlanta where he is expected to participate in a panel discussion at the National Rx Drug Abuse & Heroin Summit. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

Michael Botticelli, director of the National Drug Control Policy at the White House, told reporters in advance of the president's trip that the extra money being sought is an acknowledgement from Obama that "there is still a significant treatment gap for people who need it." Most of the money would fund agreements with states to expand medication-assisted treatment.

Along those lines, the Department of Health and Human Services will issue a proposed rule allowing physicians who prescribe Buprenorphine to give it to more patients to help them reduce or quit their use of heroin or other opiates. The proposed rule would expand the limit from 100 patients to 200.

The department also will issue guidance to programs that allow intravenous drug addicts to trade dirty syringes for clean ones. Congress recently allowed federal money to be used for certain expenses, such as staff and equipment, but not for syringes themselves.



President Barack Obama walks over to shake hands with guests on the tarmac after arriving on Air Force One at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport Tuesday, March 29, 2016, in Atlanta where he is expected to participate in a panel discussion at the National Rx Drug Abuse & Heroin Summit. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

Officials also are focused on better educating prescribers. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently issued new guidelines stating that physical therapy, exercise and over-the-counter pain medication should be used before turning to painkillers like morphine

and oxycodone. Sixty universities will announce that their students will have to learn prescriber information in line with the new guidelines in order to graduate.

Health officials speaking at the conference earlier Tuesday said doctor training will be key.

"Changes must start with us," said Dr. Patrice Harris, chairman of an American Medical Association task force on the crisis.

She said there have been some signs of progress. For the past two years, the total number of prescriptions for opioids has decreased.

"Physicians have changed their prescribing practices for many reasons, which is a good sign, a sign of progress, but I think we all can agree that there is more work to do," Harris said.

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