

Washington state, Seattle are latest to sue opioid makers

September 28 2017, by Gene Johnson



Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson, second from left, listens to a question, Thursday, Sept. 28, 2017, in Seattle, as he stands near a chart detailing increases in overdoses and hospital stays relating to opioid use in Washington state. Ferguson said Thursday that the state and the city of Seattle are filing lawsuits against several makers of opioids, including Purdue Pharma, seeking to recoup costs incurred by government when the drugs—which many officials blame for a national addiction crisis—are abused. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

Washington state and the city of Seattle on Thursday joined more than two dozen other government entities across the country suing to hold opioid makers accountable for an addiction crisis that has claimed thousands of lives.

The governments hope to recoup costs of responding to drug addiction, including money spent on emergencies, criminal justice and social services.

"Unlike earthquakes and hurricanes, this disaster is a human-made crisis," Seattle City Attorney Pete Holmes told a news conference at Harborview Medical Center, where officials said more than 100 people were being treated for addiction.

The latest suits, filed separately in King County Superior Court, accuse the companies of deliberately overstating the effectiveness of their prescription painkillers while misleading patients and doctors about the risks of addiction—in violation of Washington's consumer protection laws.

The state's complaint names Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin, while the city names numerous defendants, including Purdue, Teva Pharmaceutical and Teva Pharmaceutical.

In a written statement, Purdue denied the allegations but said it is "deeply troubled" by the addiction crisis and "dedicated to being part of the solution."

"As a company grounded in science, we must balance patient access to FDA-approved medicines, while working collaboratively to solve this public health challenge," it said.



Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson, second from left, talks to reporters Thursday, Sept. 28, 2017, in Seattle, as he stands near a chart detailing the increase of admissions for opioid addiction treatment in Washington state. Ferguson said Thursday that the state and the city of Seattle are filing lawsuits against several makers of opioids, including Purdue Pharma, seeking to recoup costs incurred by government when the drugs, which many officials blame for a national addiction crisis, are abused. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

More than two dozen states, cities and counties—including Ohio, Mississippi, Orange County in California, and the Washington cities of Everett and Tacoma—have sued the pharmaceutical companies. Most other states have recently broadened a joint effort to investigate the companies' actions.

If the industry cooperates, the investigation could lead to a national settlement. Connecticut Attorney George Jepsen has said there are early indications that drug makers and distributors will discuss the matter with

the states.

Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson said he was withdrawing from that effort because he was ready to sue now in light of the ongoing harms opioid addiction is causing in the state. Nearly 10,000 people have died from overdoses in the state since 2000, he said.

"Purdue Pharma has knowingly conducted an uncontrolled experiment on the people of Washington state and the American public without any reliable, clinical evidence that opioids are safe or even effective at treating long-term, chronic pain," he said.

Ferguson and Holmes were joined at the news conference by representatives of the Seattle police and fire departments, as well as Rose Dennis, of Kirkland, who said her son became addicted as a 12-year-old when he spent nine months hooked to an opioid drip while being treated for leukemia at a Seattle medical center. He's now 31, and has struggled since his teens with addiction and homelessness.

She said she knew he had a problem when she visited him in treatment, and he asked her to leave, saying, "This is my happy time."

She declined to sue the doctors, she said: "In reality, they saved my son's life from cancer."

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that in 2015, drug overdoses killed more than 52,000 Americans. Most involved prescription opioids such as OxyContin or Vicodin or related illicit drugs such as heroin and fentanyl. People with addictions often switch among the drugs.

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