

\$500M-plus from opioid deal starts heading to Washington

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The first payments from a \$518 million settlement with the nation's three largest opioid distributors will begin reaching Washington communities in December, providing much-needed cash officials can use to hire first responders or direct toward prevention, treatment and other services, Attorney General Bob Ferguson said Monday.

"These significant resources will help Washington fight back against the [opioid epidemic](#) that continues to rip holes through the very fabric of our communities and of families, overwhelm our public health resources, and inundate our foster care system with young, innocent victims," Ferguson told a news conference in Seattle.

Ferguson, a Democrat, rejected a national settlement with the distributors—McKesson Corp., Cardinal Health Inc. and AmerisourceBergen Corp.—as well as Johnson & Johnson that nearly every other state has accepted. Under that deal, the states will receive nearly \$20 billion over 18 years.

Instead, Washington spent six months in a complex trial against the companies before reaching its own settlement in May, one that's worth \$46 million more than the state would have received under the national deal. Washington is also pursuing a separate lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson, which is expected to go to trial next year.

Over the last two decades, the deaths of more than 500,000 Americans have been linked to overdoses of opioids, including both prescription

pain kills and [illicit drugs](#) such as heroin. Deaths have recently skyrocketed from the spread of illegally produced fentanyl.

The attorney general argued that the three companies shipped such a vast amount of drugs to Washington that it was obvious they were fueling addiction: Opioid sales in the state rose more than 500% between 1997 and 2011. In 2011, more than 112 million daily doses of all prescription opioids were dispensed in the state—enough for a 16-day supply for every resident. In 2015, eight of Washington's 39 counties had more prescriptions than residents.

The companies insisted that they merely supplied opioids that had been prescribed by doctors, and it wasn't their role to second-guess the prescriptions or interfere in the doctor-patient relationship.

Further, the companies argued, Washington state itself played a large role in the epidemic. In the 1990s, concerned that people in [chronic pain](#) were being undertreated, lawmakers passed the Intractable Pain Act, which made it easier to prescribe opioids.

Nationally, the opioid industry has agreed to settlements totaling more than \$40 billion.

The \$518 million from the settlement with distributors is coming to Washington over the next 17 years, with \$55 million arriving in the first payment on Dec. 1. Some \$476 million of the total will go toward combatting the opioid crisis, such as to substance abuse treatment; expanding access to overdose-reversal drugs; and providing housing, job placement and other services for those struggling with addiction. The rest of the money will go toward litigation costs.

Washington's settlement required approval from 125 cities and counties, which are receiving \$215 million directly and which agreed among

themselves how to split the money based on factors such as how many painkillers were shipped to their jurisdictions and how many residents died from overdoses.

While Washington's most populous county, King County, and its cities will receive \$56 million, some smaller communities are receiving more modest amounts. Burien, a south Seattle suburb, is getting just \$58,000.

Burien Mayor Sofia Aragon, who is a [registered nurse](#) by training, said she expected that her city would pool its money with several other cities in south King County on initiatives that could include better crisis treatment centers for the region.

"Many of the cities are still thinking about what they can be doing," she said. "Now that all 125 jurisdictions have signed on, it will be a lot easier to coordinate."

Ferguson also declined to go along with a national bankruptcy plan for Purdue Pharma, maker of Oxycontin, and the Sackler family. In March, he and eight other attorneys general won an additional \$1.2 billion from the Sacklers to help states, cities and tribes address the harms of the [opioid](#) epidemic.

Washington's share of the bankruptcy payout more than doubled, from \$70 million under the original plan to \$183 million.

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