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MEDIA ADVISORY:

Statewide Project Launches in Response to Rise in Overdose Deaths During COVID-19

(Jan. 7, 2021) — Governor Gina M. Raimondo’s Overdose Prevention and Intervention Task Force has announced the launch of Rhode Island’s 10,000 Chances Project, a new initiative to reduce overdose deaths and save lives. This effort arrives at an important time as the national and local drug overdose epidemics continue to accelerate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through partnerships with local, community-based organizations, the Project will distribute more than 10,000 kits of the overdose reversal medicine, naloxone (also called Narcan®), into the hands of Rhode Islanders who are at risk of overdose and families and friends of people who are at risk.

During the first eight months of 2020, data from the Rhode Island Department of Health's Office of the State Medical Examiners (OSME) tracked 271 accidental drug overdose deaths, compared with 211 during the same time period in 2019. Between these two periods, fatal drug overdoses increased by 28 percent and opioid-involved fatal overdoses increased by 34 percent. (It can take up to 90 days for the OSME to confirm a decedent's cause and manner of death.)

Approved agencies received 500 two-pack intranasal naloxone kits and \$5,000 to support strategic distribution efforts. Priority was given to applicants with experience offering services and support to high-risk populations in Rhode Island communities with increased drug overdose activity.

“Anxiety, depression and isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has made the opioid epidemic more deadly. People are turning to potentially lethal substances and often using them by themselves with no one to administer naloxone should they overdose,” said Kathryn Power, Director of the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals. “Now more than ever, it is important that state and local agencies work together; the fast response on this project highlights the urgency of this epidemic. Everyone who is at-risk, and those that care for them, should have access to naloxone to reverse the effects when an overdose occurs.”

“What underlies the diseases of substance use disorder and COVID-19 are factors in our communities that affect people’s abilities to be healthy and safe, such as housing, employment, education, and discrimination,” said Director of Health Nicole Alexander-Scott, MD, MPH. “Providing harm reduction tools – like naloxone – to people who use drugs and their loved ones can prevent fatal overdoses and offer the chance for recovery. Naloxone is a safe and easy-to-use medicine that can prevent an opioid overdose. Every overdose is preventable. There is help and there is hope for everyone who is living with the disease of substance use disorder.”

Directors Alexander-Scott and Power are the co-chairs of Governor Raimondo's Overdose Prevention and Intervention Task Force.

The following Rhode Island community-based organizations each received \$5,000 in grant funding and 500 two-pack intranasal naloxone kits for statewide distribution: AIDS Care Ocean State, Amos House, Community Care Alliance, East Bay Community Action Program, Gateway HealthCare Inc., Lifespan/Rhode Island Hospital, Parent Support Network, Pawtucket Housing Authority, Preventing Overdose and Naloxone Intervention in partnership with The Miriam Hospital, Project Weber/RENEW, The Providence Center, Rhode Island Communities for Addiction Recovery Efforts (RICARES), and The University of Rhode Island (URI's) Community First Responder Program.

This Project is a collaboration between the Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services; the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities, and Hospitals; the Department of Health; the Rhode Island Disaster Medical Assistance Team/Medical Reserve Corps; Brown University School of Public Health; and the University of Rhode Island's Community First Responder Program. Statewide naloxone distribution is a key initiative within the Rescue Strategy of the Overdose Prevention and Intervention Task Force's Strategic Plan. The other three focus areas of the plan are prevention, treatment, and recovery.

Request Free Naloxone and Naloxone Training

Members of the public can request a free naloxone kit, safer drug use supplies, and connection to a certified peer recovery support specialist by visiting Rhode Island's overdose information website, PreventOverdoseRI.org. Supplies can be mailed anywhere in the state at no cost to the recipient. PreventOverdoseRI.org also offers a brief, interactive naloxone training in English and Spanish developed by The University of Rhode Island's Community First Responder Program. People requesting naloxone are encouraged to take the brief online training module to learn the signs of an overdose and how to respond.

Local Treatment and Recovery Support Services

If you or someone you care about is living with a substance use disorder, there is 24/7 treatment and mental health support available over the phone or in person.

- BH Link, Rhode Island's 24/7 behavioral health hotline, 401-414-LINK (5465), connects callers to trained professionals who can provide confidential counseling, referrals and support services. People can go to BH Link's drop-in center in-person to get connected to support at 975 Waterman Ave. in East Providence.

- The Buprenorphine Hotline, 401-606-5456, provides 24/7 telehealth services for people experiencing opioid withdrawal. Callers can learn about Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) options and make a plan for continued treatment and recovery support through a Rhode Island Center of Excellence. Rhode Island Centers of Excellence are specialty centers that use evidence-based practices and provide treatment and the coordination of care to individuals with moderate to severe opioid use disorder.

- Fire stations in East Providence, Providence, Newport, and Woonsocket are "Safe Stations." They are open every day to help people in crisis get connected to a peer recovery support specialist and treatment and recovery support services.

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