



Issue: Opioid Crisis in Virginia

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Medicaid expansion is an effective way, financially and medically, to combat the opioid addiction problem in Virginia.

In November 2016, State Health Commissioner Marissa J. Levine declared Virginia's opioid addiction crisis a public health emergency. The number of overdose deaths in Virginia averages three daily, and hospital admissions continue to spike, Levine said in announcing her decision to escalate the administration's response. Drug overdoses surpassed car crashes as the leading cause of unnatural deaths in 2013. Levine said emergency room visits for heroin overdoses are 89 percent higher for the first nine months of 2016 compared with the same period last year.⁽¹⁾ The Commonwealth of Virginia lost 1,039 people to drug overdose in 2015.⁽²⁾

"Surge in opioid addiction, limited funding has led to crisis in Virginia" was the headline of the Richmond-Times Dispatch on Feb 27, 2016. *"Tepid state funding growth coupled with rising medical costs have resulted in an 18 percent drop in the number of people the state treats for all forms of substance-abuse issues each year, according to officials with the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. That comes as a 40 percent spike in the number of people seeking treatment for opiate abuse has further strained an already overwhelmed system."*⁽²⁾ Metro Richmond, Winchester area, Hampton Roads, Northern Virginia and Roanoke are areas of particular concern.

One of the most effective ways to help the 102,000 uninsured, low-income Virginians who also have a drug or alcohol problem or a mental illness is to accept the federal funding from Medicaid Expansion to close the state's coverage gap, according to the latest U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report. Currently, Substance Use Disorders services are funded through a patchwork of federal grant dollars and general funds. Although Virginia's Medicaid program reimburses for substance abuse treatment, the rates are so low that doctors lose money on treatment services.⁽⁴⁾ And poor adults, (earning less than 138% of the federal poverty level) are not eligible for state Medicaid.

If Virginia were to expand Medicaid, the federal government would cover 90 cents on every dollar spent on all aspects of combating the opioid crisis: prevention, initial intervention, treatment and recovery management. State general funds could then be "freed up" for other uses such as education. Especially important is using Medicaid for routine primary care for youths and young adults, an important avenue for detecting and treating early substance misuse or mental illness before more significant problems develop.⁽³⁾



With Medicaid expansion, the number of treatment centers and staffing could increase to help more people in need. For example: the situation of Kristin Roope:⁽⁴⁾

Roope remembers being dirty, hungry and barefoot in the lobby of the Richmond Behavioral Health Authority five years ago, only to be told she would be added to a waiting list. "The people were extremely nice and wanted to help, but there was nothing they could do," Roope said. Desperate people such as Roope often have to wait two months or more to be enrolled in detox or at a clinic where they can receive drugs used to treat opiate addicts.

If additional funds were available from Medicaid expansion, Virginia would finally be able to fully tackle the opioid crisis. A patchwork of funding sources and clinics currently treat substance abuse patients with minimal follow through. Expanded Medicaid would provide for regular primary care visits that could detect and prevent addiction, regular treatment with medication and follow-up to prevent relapse. And best of all, at least 90% of the costs would be paid for by the federal government.

- (1) <http://www.richmond.com/news/virginia/opioid-addiction-crisis-declared-public-health-emergency-in-virginia/article>
- (2) <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/statedeaths.html>
- (3) http://www.dailyprogress.com/opinion/opinion-commentary-medicare-expansion-one-of-best-strategies-to-help/article_91d73718-fea7-11e5-b4ee-0f481baf0e0e.html
- (4) http://www.richmond.com/news/virginia/government-politics/surge-in-opioid-addiction-limited-funding-have-led-to-crisis/article_b3f66ca8-84aa-5e01-8149-f1e82b10f030.html