

How Wake County will spend millions of dollars in opioid settlement money



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In 2022, the Wake County Board of Commissioners approved \$4.85 million in opioid abatement funding from the National Opioid Settlement.

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Many people in recovery from drug use often need help finding a place to live.

Housing can be even more of a challenge if they lack familial support or struggle with mental-health issues. If they are recently incarcerated, they are 50 times more likely to overdose and die as a result.

Wake County leaders want to expand ways to help with \$7.5 million in opioid settlement money next year.

Over the next 18 years, Wake County will get \$65.6 million from the historic national [opioid settlement](#). The money comes from companies that made or distributed prescription painkillers and were sued for their role in the millions of people who overdosed on opioids or became addicted.

North Carolina will be [getting \\$1.5 billion](#).

“We’re serious about this; we’re excited about this,” said Wake Commissioner Cheryl Stallings, one of the leaders who spearheaded the effort. “We all now recognize how great this need is. Unfortunately, sometimes, it takes a real crisis to get our attention and I’m sorry that we’re in this place, but we have a great opportunity.”

Where is the \$7.5 million going?

In 2022, 219 people died from drug overdoses in Wake County. Opioids, medicines prescribed for pain like codeine, fentanyl, oxycodone, and morphine, were responsible in three-quarters of the deaths.

Wake leaders have been working with residents, affected families, and recovery groups to find the best ways to address the epidemic through prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery.

There are six key areas the funding will focus on.

▪ Expanding treatment access

About \$2.45 million will go toward addiction treatment, including for incarcerated people. This includes money for medications, like buprenorphine and methadone that specifically treat opioid use disorder, said Alyssa Kitlas, the county's opioid settlement program manager.

"In Wake County, there are some really strong programs, but not everyone has access, particularly (non-) and under-insured individuals," Kitlas said. "Overdose deaths are highest when folks are leaving incarceration. They go through withdrawal, their tolerance is lower and also the drug supply is so variable right now."

The county's health department is partnering with the Wake County Sheriff's Office to expand access to medications for opioid-use disorder to people in jail.

▪ Care navigation

This area includes helping people in recovery navigate housing, employment, treatment and other health care. The goal is to address these needs with \$1.9 million for support services, \$1 million for recovery housing services, and \$1 million for youth and families in early intervention strategies.

"We're trying to help support our children and their families, and that's going to involve all of our community partners who work with youth, including the school system," Stallings said.

▪ Preventing overdose deaths

About \$300,000 will go toward expanding access to Naloxone, a drug that can reverse an opioid overdose when given in time. The drug can be found in local pharmacies and clinics and is carried by school resource officers in some Wake schools.

"The need has clearly outpaced our current availability," Kitlas said. "This will be a mix of us increasing our purchasing for community-based organizations but also supporting organizations to do overdose prevention training and awareness. ... People need to know about it, and they need to know how to use it."

The Wake County Public School System Board of Education is weighing whether to expand access to Naloxone in schools.

Kitlas said a large part of prevention is educating people on what an overdose looks like and identifying the warning signs. Getting Xanax from a friend to help relax can have deadly consequences if the drug is laced with fentanyl, she said.

“We really need to get the messaging out more broadly,” Kitlas said.

- **Historically marginalized groups and community engagement**

Strengthening access for historically marginalized people in Wake County is a priority, with \$500,000 being used to build partnerships with organizations in ZIP codes with the highest rates of addiction and the least resources, Kitlas said.

“We’re starting to see a plateau of overdoses in Wake County, which is what the state has seen and what’s happening nationally, but that’s not true across all communities,” she said. “We want to center equity in the work we do.”

Collaborative strategic planning efforts for community engagement will get \$300,000.

The opioid dashboard

The [Core NC Dashboard](#) provides yearly funding amounts and scheduled payments for the settlement funding for each North Carolina county.

The county will begin distributing the money by the start of fiscal year 2025, which starts July 1, 2024.