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Wake County to take fight against opioid addiction and overdoses to the streets

BY WILLIAM TONG

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Wake County will work with 13 community organizations specializing in naloxone distribution, recovery support, housing services and more to combat the effects of the opioid epidemic. *Durham County Sheriff's Dept.*

Lindsey Humphreys has been recovering from opioid addiction for the last five years, she said.

She's known people in Wake County who have died from opioids because they didn't have access to naloxone, a life-saving drug that reverses the effects of opioid overdose.

“I decided to be part of the solution and just started to distribute this,” she said. “I have been doing it for the last couple of years in the memory of some of my friends who passed.”

Humphreys is the executive director of Illuminate NC, an organization that helps distribute naloxone in Wake and Vance counties. Illuminate distributes about 300 naloxone units a month, she said.

Now the group will also receive money from Wake County to set up 10 streetside naloxone dispensers using repurposed newspaper boxes.

OPIOID SETTLEMENT MONEY

Illuminate is one of 13 organizations that will partner with Wake County this year to fight opioid addiction.

With about \$3.5 million in opioid settlement money, the county plans to work with the groups to expand naloxone distribution, youth intervention, housing support and other services, opioid settlement manager Alyssa Kitlas told the Wake County Board of Commissioners last week.

These partnerships are the first of two funding waves the county plans to roll out over the next few months, she said.

The county will receive a total of \$65.6 million from legal settlements with manufacturers and distributors for their role in the opioid epidemic. Wake County agreed to the settlement in November 2021 and received more than \$4.7 million in 2023. The money will continue to flow through 2039.

‘TOO MANY NEIGHBORS, FAMILY MEMBERS, FRIENDS’

Opioid overdose deaths in Wake County have steadily increased since 2000, according to data from the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services.

In 2022, 241 people died of opioid overdose in Wake County.

“Those are too many neighbors, family members, friends that we’re losing to the overdose crisis,” Kitlas said. “This is also really important because the timing — particularly for these settlement funds — is just so critical to really bringing down those numbers.”

In April, the county commissioners agreed to spend \$7.5 million this fiscal year to combat the problem. Since then, the county has provided buprenorphine, a painkiller and treatment for opioid addiction, at low or no cost to underinsured residents.

The county has also expanded treatment to people incarcerated in Wake County’s detention centers.

“Now they’re going inside the facility,” Sheriff Willie Rowe told the commissioners. “And it’s working very well.”

Kitlas said about 35 people a day currently get medication-assisted treatment in the detention centers.

Wake County public schools will also benefit from the settlement money, Kitlas added. The school system plans to have naloxone kits available in every building this fall. Naloxone reverses an opioid overdose.

The funding for the 13 community organizations also comes from the \$7.5 million 2025 spending plan. In total, the county received 39 applications for the funding.

Wake County Opioid Support Partnerships

Organizations, support category and initiative description for each Wave 1 partner

Organization

Arise Collective

Support Category

Recovery Support

Funding Project

Women's Re-entry Project

Organization

Coastal Horizons

Support Category

Recovery Support

Funding Project

Peer support specialist for people with Opioid Use Disorder who interact with the justice system

Organization

Healing Transitions

Support Category

Source: Wake County Board of Commissioners Meeting Packet • Data Visualization by William Tong

 A Flourish table