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## Council urged to see opioid addiction as 'disease of the brain'

74 Posted on September 5, 2017 at 6:16 PM



Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall speaks to the Alabama Opioid Overdose and Addiction Council today in Montgomery. (Mike Cason/mcason@al.com)

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By **Mike Cason**, [mcason@al.com](mailto:mcason@al.com)

A 36-member group appointed to find solutions to the opioid addiction crisis in Alabama met for the first time today.

The Alabama Opioid Overdose and Addiction Council, which includes professionals from mental health, public health, law enforcement and other fields, is scheduled to send a plan to Gov. Kay Ivey by the end of the year.

The council is an expanded version of a group initially appointed by Ivey's predecessor, Gov. Robert Bentley, so it's not starting from scratch. Several previously appointed committees gave reports today.

Drug overdoses claimed 736 lives in Alabama in 2015, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Opioid overdoses caused 282 of those deaths, a Kaiser Family Foundation review of CDC data found.

The problem is national. The CDC said 52,404 people died in the United States in 2015 from drug overdoses. Sixty-three percent of the deaths involved an opioid.

"This is the biggest public health problem that we're facing at this time in this country," Acting State Health Officer Dr. Scott Harris told the council. Harris is a co-chair of the group.

Attorney General Steve Marshall, also a co-chair, said the problem must be attacked from multiple sides. Those include more effective monitoring of a prescription data base, educating the community about the problem and providing tools for law enforcement and treatment providers.

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"I think the glaring issue, at least right now, appears to be what we're doing in the area of treatment," Marshall said. He said key challenges are finding more services for indigents and those with no insurance and help for people who need long-term, drug-assisted treatment.

Several of the council members today mentioned the importance of recognizing the nature of addiction.

"Substance use disorder is a disease of the brain," Mental Health Commissioner Lynn Beshear, also a co-chair of the council, said. "It's scary to us. We don't react to that the way we react to other diagnoses. If a friend or family member has cancer or heart disease or any other problem, we react with sympathy. If someone is addicted to drugs, rather through their own fault or that of a trusted prescriber, we tend to think of them in a whole different way."

Beshear said that approaching addiction as a disease, rather than a character flaw, helps focus the attention on the science needed to solve the problem, instead of emotion and prejudice.

Sarah Harkless, director of Substance Abuse Treatment and Development for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, said more access to treatment and ending the stigma attached to addiction are key goals. Harkless said the stigma keeps some people from getting the help they need. She said it's important to understand that some people need long-term, medication-assisted treatment, contrary to the belief that they can beat their addiction "cold turkey."

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"We want treatment to be just like diabetes, heart disease, cancer," said Harkless, who is an adviser to the council. "When you get it, then you're going to know you've got it because we will have put enough information out there and that help is going to be readily available, regardless. No moral judgment placed on it, nothing. Just go and get what you need because it's treatable. People do get well and they live health and happy lives, if they come out of the closet and get the help."

The council's next meeting is Oct. 24.

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