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Alabamians work to solve the state's opioid epidemic

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For David Albright, it was his military service that sparked his interest in substance abuse and mental health disorders. The subject hits close to home for the associate professor, who had a female veteran friend that turned to opiates and alcohol following her return from Afghanistan. She ultimately died by suicide.

"I have known multiple other veterans who have turned to opiates to manage some of the physical pain," said Albright, Hill Crest Foundation Endowed Chair in Mental Health in The University of Alabama School of Social Work. "Unfortunately, I've watched that lead to addiction and some other problems."

From educators and professionals like Albright, to students on college campuses, to the governor herself, members of the Alabama community are working to address the issue of opioid abuse.

Since 2011, the rise of prescription painkillers – reaching an all-time high in 2016 – has led organizations such as the CDC to label opioid proliferation as an epidemic. Due to their addictive and habit-forming qualities, painkillers have become among the top causes of overdose in the United States. For doctors, it is important to limit dosage over a period of time so that patients can better monitor taking prescription opiates to avoid developing a dangerous habit.

The state of Alabama has the highest opioid prescription rate measuring around 135.3 prescriptions per one hundred residents, according to the CDC. This information notes that painkiller prescriptions vary from state to state, but the fact doctors must limit the amount of opioids given to patients still stands.

"I don't think there is any one reason that explains that rate," Albright said. "There are multiple contributors to that. What I tend to focus on is the need in our state for more workforce to be able to help. Our training as social workers is to be able to go out into the Alabama community and make a difference. One reason, and not the only reason, is that there are critical shortages of behavioral health providers in our state, including social workers."

By working to stop opioid habits before they start, social workers and those cracking down on narcotic painkiller prescriptions can limit the number of opioid overdoses.

Ross D'Entremont, a junior majoring in political science and SGA vice president for academic affairs, believes opioid use is high in Alabama because of the state's low academic achievement.

Earlier this year, D'Entremont received a Transforming Youth Recovery grant which he is using to advertise the University's Collegiate Recovery Center and educate people on the dangers of drug abuse on college campuses.

"First I would want to put more grant money towards education of the issue, going out to rural parts of Alabama and talking about it," D'Entremont said about finding a solution to the opioid epidemic. "Second, I would start prevention in schools. You *need* to bring in survivors of drug addiction. You need to bring them into the schools and have them talk to the students."

In reaction to the growing need to combat the opioid epidemic, Governor Kay Ivey has begun to crack down on the issue harder than previous Alabama governors. In August, Ivey signed Executive Order 708 which established the Alabama Opioid Overdose and Addiction Council.

Albright is among the 36 council members appointed by Ivey.

A press release made available on Governor Ivey's website said, that a total of 736 people in Alabama died in 2015 from drug overdoses. Of Alabama's 736 reported drug overdose deaths in 2015, a total of 282 – 38 percent – were caused by opioids, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation review of CDC data.

"Opioid addiction is a major problem in Alabama," Ivey said in the press release. "We are a top prescribing state with hundreds of deaths each year from overdose. It's a serious situation that all citizens need to be aware of and help us with."

The Alabama Opioid Overdose and Addiction Council will go before the governor in December to plan further action on the situation.

Albright said that since close to a quarter of Americans experience symptoms of mental illness, people should consider it to be normal: as something to be talked about and not fearful of.

"I think The University of Alabama and the state of Alabama are doing a good job by creating a safe space to have these conversations," Albright said. "And providing opportunities for individuals who want or need additional help."

He said one thing that everyone can do is work to increase awareness and be able to talk about substance use.

"To be able to talk about the use of opiates to understand that oftentimes, substance abuse is comorbid with some mental health disorders," Albright said. "Something we can all do is work to inform ourselves. Work to destigmatize, to normalize."

D'Entremont agrees with this and hopes that people will shift their view of drug abusers, seeing that jail time is not always the answer, but rather access to mental healthcare.

"I cannot stress this enough. People need to realize that drug addicts are not criminals in need of punishment," D'Entremont said. "They are friends and family in need of help."



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