

Governor Bentley Announces Alabama to Participate in Learning Lab to Combat Opioid Epidemic

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Monday announced that Alabama has been selected to participate in a National Governors Association learning lab to help combat the opioid epidemic. Through the learning lab, Alabama will build on existing efforts by developing and implementing strategic action plans for reducing overdoses and deaths related to heroin and illicit fentanyl.

“As a physician, and as a governor, I understand the importance of fighting prescription drug abuse,” Governor Bentley said. “Alabama is the highest painkiller prescribing state in the nation and nonmedical use of pain relievers in Alabama exceeds the national average. This has fueled an unprecedented resurgence of heroin in the state. Since 2012, Alabama has been on the forefront of promoting greater awareness about the potential dangers of prescription drugs. That year I helped lead the Prescription Drug Abuse Project, hosted by the National Governors Association. It was a year-long initiative in strategic planning aimed at reducing prescription drug abuse. In 2013, I signed bills improving prescription drug monitoring programs, increasing regulations on pain management clinics and establishing penalties for patients who ‘doctor shop’. I know that our team, through the NGA Learning Lab, will continue to build on our existing efforts to combat opioid abuse in our state and will return with new innovative ideas to put an end to this deadly epidemic.”

Inappropriate opioid prescribing has fueled one of the deadliest drug epidemics in our nation’s history, claiming the lives of 78 people every day. Though prescription opioid painkillers have driven a steady increase in drug-related overdose deaths over the last 15 years, heroin and illicit fentanyl have led to a more recent spike in deaths. In the midst of the current opioid crisis, governors and states are taking action to prevent opioid-related overdoses and save lives.

The Alabama team that will be working as part of the NGA Learning Lab includes the following: Team leader, Sarah Harkless, Director of Substance Abuse Treatment and Development, Alabama Department of Mental Health; David White, Health Policy Advisor to Governor Bentley; Nancy Bishop, State Pharmacy Director, Alabama Department of Public Health; Karen Smith, Associate Director of Clinics/Ancillary Services and Mental Health Programs, Alabama Medicaid Agency; Bob Steelman, Investigator, Alabama Board of Medical Examiners; and Denise Shaw, Court Management Analyst, Alabama Administrative Office of Courts.

NGA learning labs provide an opportunity for a small group of state teams to learn about the details of a state program that is successfully putting an innovative practice in place. This is a six-month opportunity for governors’ senior staff and other state officials to receive technical assistance.