



# Alabama releases plan to fight opioid epidemic

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By Hannah Ward, Reporter CONNECT

BIRMINGHAM, AL (WBRC) - We're working to find out how the state's new plan to fight opioid abuse would actually work. This 75-page plan is well thought out and is a collaborative effort of hundreds of people in our state including health departments, law enforcement, doctors, dentists, the drug task force, and several others.

Dr. Mark Wilson is the health officer for Jefferson County and he says that in Alabama, Jefferson County is one of the hardest hit areas with opioid deaths. "Those numbers in recent years have been over 200 per year of people dying from heroin overdose fentanyl and a hand full of prescription overdose deaths. So, it is a very serious public health problem," Dr. Wilson explains.

Dr. Wilson says it started in the 90s when doctors were encouraged to prescribe more opioid pain medication and years later medical professional realized they were overprescribing. "As prescriptions became less available more people have become addicted. People are now turning to heroin on the streets and now fentanyl," he explains.

Now we have a big problem on our hands which is why Gov. Ivey signed an executive order 6 months ago to create an overdose and addiction council to come up with the "State of Alabama Opioid Action Plan."

Dr. Stefan Kertesz is a Professor of Prevention medicine at UAB and he says this plan takes a different approach compared to other states. "Every state that is responding to opioids is focused very much on the prescribing history," he explains.

Alabama is marketing their approach in two ways, one focusing on that addiction is a disease and providing information to the public about how to help those battling it. "We need to hear this because often ashamed. anyone who has addiction feels oh my goodness I am a terrible person or the family members feel this way," Dr. Kertesz states. They are also going to educate people on how to take opioids responsibly to avoid addiction.

The plan suggests ramping up the prescription drug monitoring program. "A program that monitors all of the prescriptions that doctors prescribe and that are dispensed to people for pain medicine and other controlled substances that needs to be upgraded," Dr. Wilson explains. It estimated to cost 1 million dollars which would have to be passed by lawmakers.

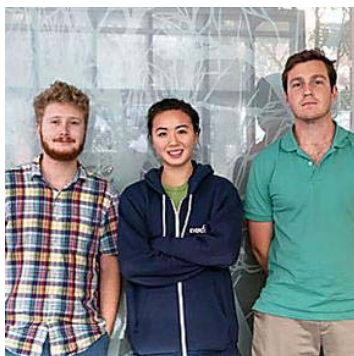
Changing treatment options and making them more available, covered by insurance, and more appealing is also in the plan but would also require money. "So, part of getting people to recognize a problem and seize help is showing them that the help is going to work and fit into their lives," Dr. Kertesz explains. He says this plan investigates the barriers that keeping people away from treatment and provide more resources for treatment.

This is just a plan for right now but it is a step. The next step is to find funding to back this plan which will be up to lawmakers.

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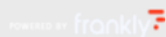


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