



For Immediate Release

June 7, 2023

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Kershaw County receives opioid abatement funding.

The South Carolina Opioid Recovery Fund Board (“SCORF Board”) recently awarded Kershaw County a \$340,000 in funding for activities and programming designed to reduce the use and misuse of opioids and other substances of misuse and abuse. This project will be administered by ALPHA Behavioral Health Center (ALPHA) for activities covering a range of services across Kershaw County.

This funding was requested from SCORF in order to address a wide range of activities designed to reduce and eliminate the negative effects of opioids. “Last November Kershaw County experienced 19 fentanyl-related overdoses in a single weekend, including at least 4 fatalities,” ALPHA Executive Director Mara Jones said. “This outbreak was not only an obvious human tragedy, but it also placed an enormous strain on first-responders and our local emergency facilities. Our community responded by forming a coalition to seek a coordinated response. Coalition partners include law enforcement, the solicitor’s office, criminal justice, first responders, treatment and counseling professionals, social services providers, and medical personnel among many others. A problem this complex requires a coordinated and diverse response,” said Jones.

Kershaw County Sheriff Lee Boan added, “This is not a problem we can solve through more arrests. We will arrest you if you buy, sell or possess illegal drugs, including opioids such as fentanyl. We can reduce the supply by locking offenders away. But we must also reduce the demand for these dangerous drugs through other means, and that’s what this coalition intends to do. That’s the intent of this first wave of abatement funding.”

Experts warn that the United States is currently experiencing an alarming surge in what is often referred to as the “opioid epidemic.” The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) refers to the current stage of this epidemic as a “third wave” which began in 2013 and is characterized by a dramatic increase in overdose deaths due synthetic opioids, including fentanyl. “Fentanyl has become a huge problem in the illicit drug market. Other drugs such as xylazine are also becoming more of a problem. The public needs to be aware that this problem also extends to legal medications which can fall into the hands of users through the underground market. We urge people to check their medicine cabinets, bedside tables, purses and briefcases and properly dispose of old or unused pain medications to keep them out of circulation. Abuse and misuse of legitimate opioid medications is just as big a problem as is the use of fentanyl and xylazine” said Jones.

Coalition activities will include distribution and availability of NARCAN, which can be easily administered to almost instantly reverse an overdose. “NARCAN is a real game-changer in the battle against opioids. I can think of no other intervention which can work as quickly and is as easy to administer with immediate results as NARCAN. Almost anyone can carry and administer NARCAN in virtually any setting with little adverse risk. There is little to no downside to having NARCAN in every purse, office, vehicle or back pocket in Kershaw County. Lives can and will be saved by having NARCAN so widely available,” said Jones.

Other activities will include a media campaign for community awareness, drug-deactivation products and drug take-back events to reduce the supply of unused medications, “knock-and-drops” to alert the community when outbreaks occur, and education of first-responders and other relevant professionals of evidence-based clinical best-practice to name a few.

“Fentanyl has become the driver of these overdose events across the country. Drug dealers are mixing fentanyl with other products like marijuana, heroin, cocaine and even prescription pills obtained illegally in order to increase potency, but this is incredibly dangerous because only a tiny amount can lead to overdose. Users are often not even aware that they are consuming fentanyl until it is too late” said Jones. “And because tolerance to fentanyl can occur so rapidly, users must consume higher doses to reach the same effect. The risk of overdose is extremely high with fentanyl,” she added.

Kevin Rhodes has been hired as the Director of this Coalition. Rhodes has experience in a similar role when he served as the Grants Director for the Kershaw County School District from 2009-2016. This included the successful Safe Schools/Healthy Students project, which was written in response to the county’s first confirmed gang-related murder of a high school student. “I am humbled to have been given this opportunity to once again serve in a meaningful way addressing an important issue affecting our community,” Rhodes said. “In my experience this community always responds best when it responds together, and I love being in a position to facilitate and witness this in action,” he added. Rhodes said that this first wave of SCORF funding will bring the coalition together, but this is only the beginning of the county’s planned response. “We will remain focused on supporting each agency and partner as they respond to this crisis. Together we will share resources and hold each other accountable as we look for answers. We will rapidly begin deploying our response, measuring our results, and developing our next steps. We are only at the beginning of this process” he said.

Under the leadership of Mara Jones and County Council Chair Katie Guinn, Kershaw County’s opioid coalition began meeting shortly after the November overdose event. Fourteen members of this coalition attended the “Rx and Illicit Drug Summit” in Atlanta, GA in April, where they participated in a wide range of educational seminars, networking events with national thought leaders, and interactive idea exchange sessions. “We learned quite a bit about the scope of this epidemic. I think the most important lesson I learned was that we are not alone in this fight, and that progress against this terrible epidemic is possible if we respond as a community” said County Council Chair Katie Guinn, who has been part of this coalition since its formation.

“We plan to consistently capitalize upon what we learn as we move forward, and in this way our response will not only be comprehensive but will build on past success and lessons learned” Jones concluded. “This first wave of funding is only the beginning of a broad and sustained response to this terrible crisis.”

Visit <https://www.alphabehavioralhealthcenter.org> for more information on ALPHA Behavioral Health Center. Visit <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/epidemic.html> for more information on the opioid epidemic. Visit <https://scorf.sc.gov> for more information on SCORF.

Background:

ALPHA Behavioral Health Center offers many innovative and effective treatment, intervention and prevention programs designed to reduce the impact of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs of abuse, as well as behavioral health needs for citizens in Kershaw, Chesterfield and Lee Counties.

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