

Governor Phil Murphy

Governor Murphy Signs Legislative Package to Expand Harm Reduction Efforts, Further Commitment to End New Jersey's Opioid Epidemic

01/18/2022

TRENTON – Furthering his commitment to end the opioid epidemic, Governor Phil Murphy today signed a series of bills to combat the state's opioid crisis and expand harm reduction efforts. The three bills reflect Governor Murphy's comprehensive approach to end New Jersey's opioid epidemic and increase access to lifesaving resources for individuals with substance use disorders. These bills remove long-standing barriers to expanding access to harm reduction services and supplies at a critical time when a total of 3,081 New Jersey residents died from suspected drug overdoses in 2021. This package will build on investments included in the Governor's budget in recent years to bring services to residents in need of access to clean syringes and prevent transmission of HIV and hepatitis, provide health screenings, and connect individuals to treatment, vaccination, education, and recovery supports.

The original law authorizing the establishment of syringe access programs was enacted 15 years ago and has only enabled seven centers in the state to offer comprehensive harm reduction services. Though an important step forward, it did not adequately address the barriers that stigmatize syringe access services and treat them different from all other public health strategies. As a result, there is limited access to harm reduction services, which further deepens the gaps in care experienced by people who use drugs. These individuals face judgment and stigma which prevents them from accessing critical health services and linking to treatment for problematic substance use. Through this package, more harm reduction centers can be authorized to offer a comprehensive array of services in a compassionate and welcoming environment. Harm reduction centers build hope and dignity among clients and create healthier communities- something all residents deserve.

The package also creates multidisciplinary local overdose fatality review teams, which will provide invaluable insight into the circumstances surrounding fatal drug overdoses and identify opportunities for intervention that may prevent these fatalities in the future.

"Over the last four years, my Administration has prioritized a comprehensive, data-driven approach to ending New Jersey's opioid epidemic," **said Governor Murphy**. "Harm reduction is a cornerstone of our strategy, and through this legislation, we are paving the way for long-overdue expansion of syringe access and other critical services to help people with substance use disorders stay healthy, stay alive, and thrive. Furthermore, by decriminalizing syringes and fentanyl test strips, we are acknowledging that this crisis cannot be ended through criminalizing critical harm reduction supplies that prevent fatal overdose and transmission of disease. In 2021, there were 3,081 suspected drug-related deaths in New Jersey. While this was not a significant increase over 2020, it shows this crisis is ever-present and demands that we increase access to every service that is proven to save lives, starting with harm reduction. These bills, coupled with the creation of local drug overdose fatality review teams, will strengthen our ability to save lives and further our commitment to ending the opioid crisis in New Jersey."

Governor Murphy signed the following bills into law:

S3009/A4847 (Vitale, Gopal, Gill/Vainieri Huttle, Quijano, Verrelli) – Authorizes expanded provision of harm reduction services to distribute sterile syringes and provide certain support services to persons who use drugs intravenously.

S3493/A5458 (Vitale, Gill/Vainieri Huttle, Mukherji, McKnight) – Permits expungement of possession or distribution of hypodermic syringe or needle offense in cases of previous expungement; repeals criminal offense of possession of syringe.

A798/S52 (Verrelli, Vainieri Huttle, Armato/Singer, Greenstein) – Establishes local drug overdose fatality review teams.

"The principles of harm reduction are simple. We must accept that there is drug use in our communities. Some ways of using drugs are more dangerous than other ways. We need to meet people where they are, rather than forcing on them some preconceived notion of what their life should look like," **said Senator Joe Vitale**. "The signing of these bills into law will help us reinforce the truth that harm reduction policies are successful because they help us to meet people who use drugs where they are, without judgment."

"In order for us to accurately know how many deaths are attributed to drug overdose, we must have the proper protocols in place," **said Senator Linda Greenstein**. "This law will help counties track overdose fatalities, helping health officials have a better understanding of the extent of drug addiction within the state."

"In order to more effectively confront drug use in our state, we have to wake up to the fact that harm reduction policies are effective, humane ways to begin to better tackle the problem of substance abuse and to minimize the spread of disease," **said Senator Vin Gopal**. "These bills are a good and practical step in that direction. Clean syringes, for example, have shown to be widely effective in preventing the spread of HIV, hepatitis C, and other blood-borne pathogens."

"These laws will establish vital programs that will aid in the management and care of those battling addiction, while also giving them a second chance if found in possession of a syringe," **said Senator Nia Gill**. "Not only will these measures help to save lives but they will provide support with the dignity everyone should expect when seeking treatment and receiving care."

"From every tragic overdose, we can learn valuable lessons that can help avert similar deaths in the future," said **Senator Robert Singer**. "Overdose fatality review teams have been deployed effectively in other states. With the signing of this bill, we will do the same in New Jersey, and lives will be saved."

"Research has shown time and again that harm reduction measures work," said **former Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle**. "People struggling with addiction will often find a way to obtain and use drugs regardless of the potential risks. Our state loses thousands of residents each year to overdoses alone. If we want to help our fellow community members avoid these tragic outcomes, we must offer the resources and safer alternatives they need."

"Harm reduction sites provide critical services to local residents while honoring the dignity of those living with a substance use disorder," said **Assemblywoman Annette Quijano**. "These programs are staffed by professionals who can help limit the risks of intravenous drug use, such as HIV or hepatitis infections and overdoses, while providing a safe, stigma-free environment in which to receive care. This legislation will help make it easier for these programs to be approved and maintained going forward."

"Both compassion and logic are at the heart of harm reduction programs," said **Assemblyman Anthony Verrelli**. "With countless New Jerseyans struggling with addiction every day throughout our state, we cannot turn a blind eye to their needs. Making it easier for qualified entities to start – and continue – providing clean needles, overdose antidotes, and resources that can connect individuals with other support services is how we save lives."

"This this critical new law will allow the expungement of a criminal record of unlawful possession or distribution of a hypodermic syringe or needle in cases where the person has had a previous expungement. This new law allows a second chance at a successful and prosperous new life for countless New Jerseyans who need a hand up," said **Assembly sponsors Valerie Vainieri Huttle, Raj Mukherji, and Angela McKnight of A5458**.

"Alcohol Use Disorder and Substance Use Disorder is a serious issue that impacts too many New Jerseyans. Establishing a local drug overdose fatality review team for each county is a common sense approach to address the problem. With this new law, local drug overdose fatality review teams will consist of people with experience and knowledge regarding health, social services, law enforcement, education, emergency medicine, mental health, juvenile delinquency, and drug and alcohol abuse. Together, we can help one another," said **Assembly sponsors Anthony Verrelli, Valerie Vainieri Huttle, and John Armato of A798**.

"This legislation is a game-changer for people who use drugs and people at-risk of a fatal overdose. Harm reduction is the best tool we have to end the overdose crisis, and this legislation will make sure residents in every corner of New Jersey have access to this lifesaving care. The leadership of the Murphy Administration will make New Jersey a national leader in embracing evidence-informed policies to end the overdose crisis – policies that are lifesaving for our family members, loved ones, and neighbors. I commend Governor Murphy and the bill sponsors for championing harm reduction and enacting policies that prioritize public health over punishment and stigma," said **Jenna Mellor, Executive Director of New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition**

"This is a joyous moment for people who use drugs all across our state. Many lives will be saved with the expansion of harm reduction centers and the decriminalization of syringes in New Jersey, and many peoples' inherent value and humanity will be reinforced. This is a vital step towards New Jersey ending the overdose crisis, repairing the harms of the racist drug war, and finally building the systems of care that will keep all of us alive and safer – no matter where we lay our heads," said **Caitlin O'Neill, Director of Harm Reduction Services at New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition**

"A huge thanks to Governor Murphy and New Jersey legislative champions who put public health over stigma and enacted harm reduction laws that will improve health outcomes and save our neighbors' lives. Everyone deserves access to evidence-based syringe access services, and this legislation will make that access possible," said **Jennifer Oliva, Professor and Director of the Center for Health and Pharmaceutical Law at Seton Hall University School of Law**.

"South Jersey AIDS Alliance applauds Governor Murphy's bold act in protecting and expanding syringe access in New Jersey. This legislation secures health services for some of the state of New Jersey's most vulnerable residents, from Atlantic County to Sussex County, who are all too often overlooked by policymakers. By expanding syringe access and protecting health services for people living with a substance use disorder and who are living with or at-risk of HIV, New Jersey lawmakers are saving lives," said **Carol Harney, CEO of South Jersey AIDS Alliance**.

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