

In Case You Missed It

Christie: The war on drugs has failed, treat NJ heroin addiction as an illness

Stephen Stirling

[Star-Ledger](#)

December 21, 2014

To combat New Jersey's growing heroin and opioid crisis, Gov. Chris Christie says the state needs to embrace a dramatically different approach to substance abuse, but cautioned that he will not write a blank check to get it there.

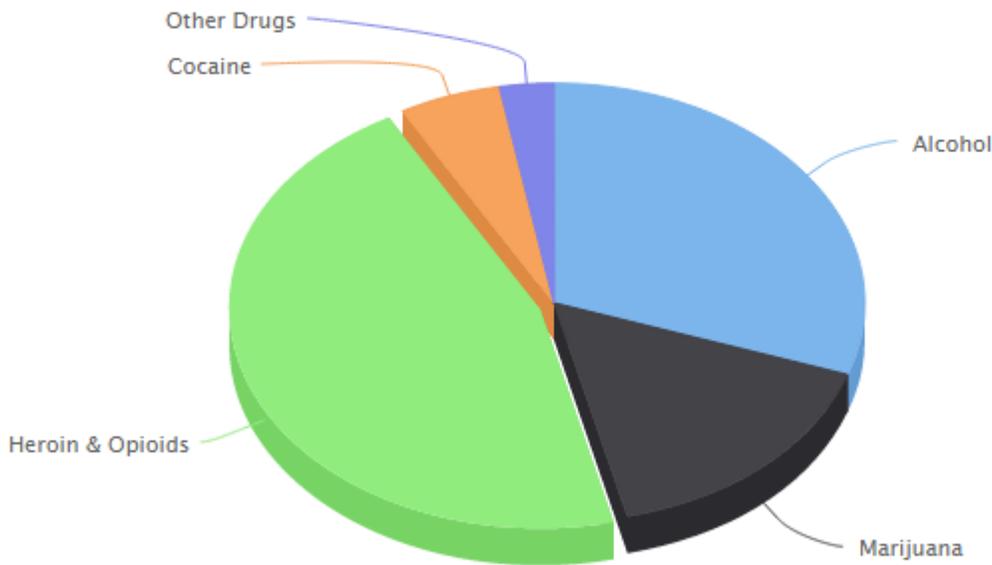
In his time as governor, heroin and opioid abuse have surged into the spotlight, claiming at least 740 lives in New Jersey alone last year, while tens of thousands of others sought treatment, many of their lives broken by addiction. Irrespective of how the state arrived at such an unenviable position, in Christie's eyes, government has a role in making sure those shackled by addiction get the help they need.

In an interview with NJ Advance Media, Christie said that means changing course, to a system that values treatment over incarceration. The War on Drugs has failed, he says, and it's time to move on.

"I think what we've seen over the last 30 years is it just hasn't worked," he said. "And there are some people who make one bad choice to try drugs one time and their particular chemistry leads them to be an addict from the minute they try it. So we need to treat it as a disease. And not having mandatory incarceration for non-violent offenders but having

mandatory treatment is something that's going to yield a much greater result for society in general and for those individuals in particular." ...

N.J. Substance Abuse Treatment by Drug 2013



Highcharts.com

A LONG HISTORY

When he talks about his connection to heroin and opioid addiction, Christie's head bows and his voice softens.

Earlier this year, a longtime friend who had struggled with addiction for years died from an overdose. Christie watched his decline, even participating in an intervention several years ago, before he was ultimately found alone in a West Orange hotel room surrounded by empty bottles of prescription opioids and alcohol.

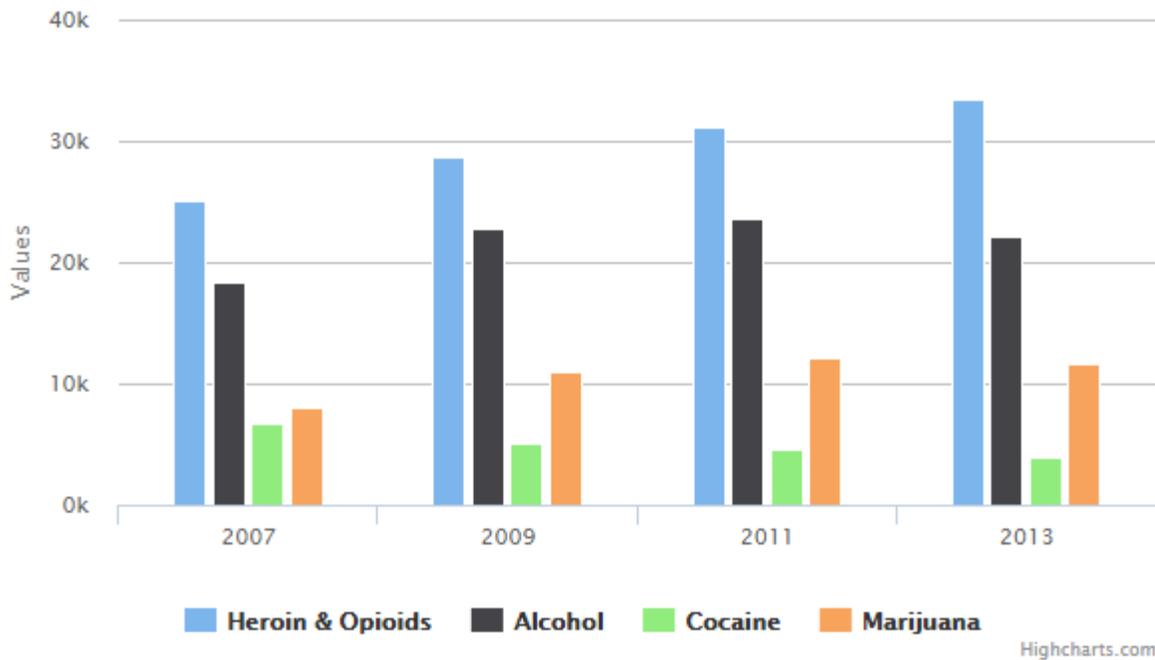
"Married, children, incredibly successful, wonderful guy, great friend. And um, I saw how hard it was to deal with this issue," Christie said, in an exclusive interview with NJ Advance Media. "So when you have these kind of experiences you realize it can happen to anybody. This is an Ivy League trained, brilliant lawyer, who just could not deal with his disease and ultimately succumbed to it. ... It strikes you that you want to kind of do what you can when you have a position like mine to make sure that happens as little as possible."

Substance abuse treatment is not a new issue for Christie.

He began working with Daytop Village, a substance abuse treatment center for adolescents, in Mendham as a Morris County freeholder in 1995. He was appointed to the Human Services Committee because "I was the youngest one there and nobody wanted it."

"When I saw those kids, I realized they could be my kids, they could be any kids. I was 32 years old at the time and had one child who was not quite a year old, so it was very acute to me," he said. "I was just starting to be a father and I thought 'Jesus, it could be my kid, we need to do something.'"

Number of Individuals in N.J. Substance Abuse Treatment 2007-2013



While Christie is a politician through-and-through with eyes on a potential presidential run in 2016, political observers say his views on substance abuse appear personally, not politically, motivated.

“On many other issues, you can look at decision making and say he has made the politically expedient choice,” said Brigid Harrison, a political science professor at Montclair State University. “That doesn’t appear to be the case here. It’s an issue that he really hasn’t kowtowed to the conservatives on, which he easily could.” ...

NEXT STEPS

Since taking office, Christie has led the charge to expand drug court, a measure that mandates treatment for non-violent drug offenders in lieu of incarceration. He enacted legislation to expand the use of Narcan, an opioid overdose antidote, a measure that has already saved the lives of hundreds statewide in its first year of broad use by emergency-responders.

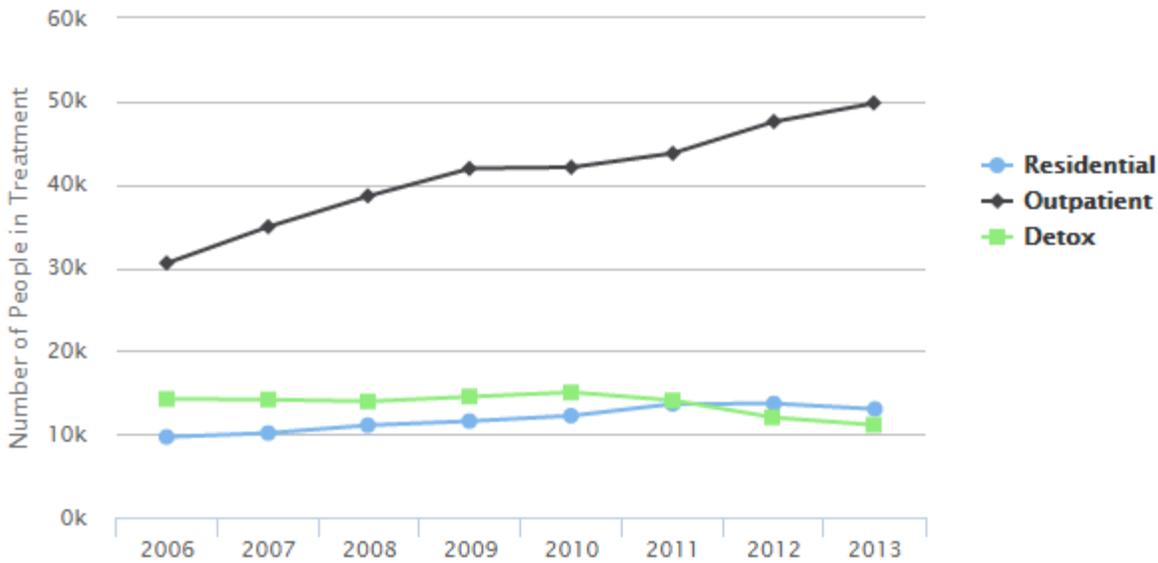
“I think all of those things are things that a governor can and should do on issues you feel really strongly about and there are very few issues that I feel as strongly about or more strongly about than this one,” he said. ...

Looking ahead, Christie said he hopes to push insurance carriers to pay more for substance abuse treatment in New Jersey and wants to improve the tracking of statistics on treatment and drug-induced deaths to better understand the nature of the problem. He also committed to fiscally support new treatment beds in New Jersey once constructed, which he said would yield long-range financial savings. ...

Full article [HERE](#).

Individuals in N.J. Substance Abuse Treatment by Type 2006-2013

While outpatient treatment services have increased dramatically with demand, detox and residential treatment have been slower to follow suit.



Highcharts.com

###

www.nj.gov/governor/

