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Common Council President



10<sup>th</sup> District Alderman

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**Michael J. Murphy**  
*City of Milwaukee Common Council*

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November 30, 2015

Stephen Hargarten, MD, MPH  
Director, Injury Research Center  
Medical College of Wisconsin  
8701 Watertown Plank Road  
Milwaukee, WI 53226

Dear Dr. Hargarten,

As you know, Wisconsin continues to battle a heroin and opiate epidemic that is placing an increased burden on communities to better understand the challenges associated with addiction and its public health implications. Milwaukee County alone has seen a 495% increase in heroin related deaths between 2005 and 2014. These deaths, together with other opiate-related overdoses, have exceeded injury related deaths such as motor vehicle fatalities and homicides. Yet while our community faces a major outbreak in the use and abuse of opioids, policymakers have much to learn and understand about the complexities of the problem in order to introduce a public health prevention model that is multipronged, multilayered and integrated across different governmental jurisdictions.

I strongly believe that to understand the multiplicity of community impacts and make informed policy recommendations, we must convene key leaders across different sectors to enhance our understanding of the scope and nature of this epidemic. To this end, last year I hosted the first ever Southeastern Wisconsin Heroin/Opiates Symposium. This all-day event aimed to engage participants in a thoughtful, honest dialogue to develop comprehensive, community-based solutions to eliminating heroin and opiate abuse.

With a further increase seen in overdoses in Milwaukee County in the first half of 2015, this fall I met with the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner and requested a dataset of all drug overdoses in Milwaukee County from 2012 through August of 2015. The dataset included a number of relevant factors including, name, birth date, death date, gender, age, race, mode of death, cause of the death (list of drug(s) noted in toxicology reports), as well as residence and death addresses.



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A preliminary review of this data by my staff highlighted a number of interesting factors:

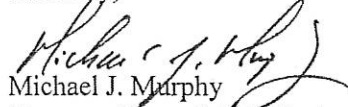
- Heroin-related deaths as a proportion of total drug-related deaths have increased from 32% in 2012 to 44% in 2015.<sup>1</sup>
- Average age of overdoses of any kind is between 42-43 years old, for both males and females.
- Heroin and oxycodone are the most commonly occurring substances found in toxicology reports during this period.
- Nearly a third of the most commonly occurring drugs in toxicology reports are benzodiazepines and other drugs used for treating depression and anxiety.
- Deaths by race have remained proportionally constant since 2012, with Caucasians accounting for 64-69% of overdoses, and African Americans, on average, making up about 25% of overdoses.

Many of these findings were surprising to me considering the popular discourse surrounding addiction. Surely, there are other confounding factors, especially if we consider other morbidity issues and near-death occurrences. As you are intimately aware with your research, these deaths have cumulative negative impacts on individuals, families and our greater community, many of which are unknown and cannot be quantified. Nevertheless, as President of the City of Milwaukee Common Council, I feel compelled to understand the intricacies of this disease to prescribe better public policy. Indeed, I see this epidemic as an opportunity for prevention.

To this end, I see no better partner in this research endeavor than the Injury Research Center of the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW). The comprehensive approaches taken by your center to research, implement, and evaluate effective injury prevention and control strategies, and your ability to convene experts in epidemiology and toxicology are precisely what is required to understand this epidemic. In the City of Milwaukee 2016 budget I created a .5 FTE position (\$25,000) to specifically work to address this problem. I seek to supplement this with an additional \$20-25,000 in private funding to create 1 FTE that works collaboratively between the Injury Research Center of MCW and the City of Milwaukee. By combining the resources at our disposal, I strongly believe we can move Milwaukee County away from an opiate abuse outbreak and back towards superior public health.

I sincerely hope you can join me in this unique and necessary opportunity for community-wide prevention.

Sincerely,

  
Michael J. Murphy  
Common Council President

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<sup>1</sup> 2015 data reflects overdoses through the end of August 2015

