N.J. drug abuse task force makes 40 recommendations in new report

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State officials last week made 40 recommendations on how legislators, state departments, treatment providers, schools and advocates can more effectively combat the opioid crisis in New Jersey.

The Governor’s Task Force on Drug Abuse Control, established by Gov. Chris Christie in January, came up with solutions for addiction problems and issues, including state department structures, professional education, general education, prevention, intervention, treatment, recovery and prisoner reentry.

“This report will serve as a blueprint for more programs and services that need to be established in our state and across the nation,” Christie said in a statement.

One recommendation that will immediately go into effect, state officials said, is to revise EMT guidelines that currently limit some first responders to administering only 2 milligrams of naloxone in overdose situations. They will now be permitted to administer 4 milligrams, the same allowed for civilians and law enforcement.

“First responders have found that 4 milligrams may be needed to counteract the deadly effects of fentanyl, which is becoming a major factor in an opioid crisis that is killing as many people as 9/11 every three weeks in America,” Christie said.

Christie has focused his final year in office on addiction initiatives. He announced last month about $200 million in state funding will be used for new and continuing addiction programs and services across the state to address the growing numbers of people with substance use disorders and overdose deaths.

Drug-related deaths, most of which involved heroin, in 2015 accounted for 1,600 people and spiked to more than 2,000 in 2016, according to the state report.

Fentanyl deaths were few in 2012 and 2013, but grew to more than 100 in 2014. More than 800 drug-related deaths in 2016 involved fentanyl.

Included in the task force’s report are recommendations to establish a more streamlined and immediate system of reporting overdose deaths, require education for doctors, nurses and other health and social services professionals on addiction and encourage the use of medication assisted therapies, or MAT.

Among recommendations already in progress is the expansion of the state’s Recovery Coach program, which utilizes peer recovery specialists to connect with incoming overdose patients in hospital emergency rooms, to all 21 counties. The program came to Atlantic County this year at AtlantiCare.

The report also detailed solutions to address reports that some people who struggled with addiction took pain reliever medications prescribed by a veterinarian and intended for a pet.

Members of the task force recommended veterinarians follow the same prescribing regulations set forth for other medical professionals, including using the multi-state Prescription Monitoring Program.
In areas related to law enforcement involvement, officials encouraged police officers to, when appropriate, direct people who are caught using or possessing drugs to treatment centers instead of prison.

“By exercising discretion in the appropriate cases, the police become partners in fostering treatment for the disease of addiction,” the report stated. “This method of dealing with those suffering from the disease of addiction has proven effective in Ocean County where it was led by Prosecutor (Joseph) Coronato.”