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TOP STORY

Cochise survey seeks input for opioid settlement fund spending

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SIERRA VISTA — The Cochise Cochise County Health and Social Services Department recently released a survey to determine where recent opioid settlement funds should cover.

“What we’re trying to do is make the money actually meet the needs of Cochise County and be effective,” said Alicia Thompson, former director of Cochise County Health and Social Services Department.

In 2018, the county decided to participate in opioid lawsuits against the nation’s manufacturer’s and distributors. In 2022, the \$26 billion global opioid lawsuit against the “Big Three” opioid distributors and manufacturer, Johnson and Johnson, was finalized. Later that year, the county started receiving funds from these lawsuits.

In an opioid overdose report published by the Arizona Department of Health Services in 2020-21, there were 3,888 opioid overdose deaths with 17,484 responses from emergency medical services and law enforcement for suspected opioid overdose in the state.

The report said the leading manner of overdose deaths are accidents and 94.5% of deaths were from prescription and synthetic opioids.

Cochise County is receiving payments from two of the lawsuits and will start to receive payments from a third lawsuit. Thompson said as the settlements continue to be resolved, the county will receive payments for years.

“Each settlement comes with its own terms,” Thompson said. “We’re very confident that if our community chooses something that fits in the treatment or the prevention, that it will meet the criteria of all the settlements.”

Thompson said the funds could go toward treatment, supporting people in treatment or recovery, prevention and other strategies. She thinks one of the big problems in Cochise County is the lack of a detox center and a level one facility that is convenient for the county.

“If I could wave my magic wand and have everyone decide how to use these funds in the best way for our community, it would be to create and develop a detox center,” Thompson said. “When somebody decides they want to get clean, they need support now. Not 12 days from now, not even 12 hours from now. They need somebody to be able to help them start that process at that moment and that does not exist here.”

She said another important part in addressing the opioid epidemic is harm reduction.

“We try to help people be as healthy as they can be, doing what they do,” she said.

Cochise Harm Reduction is a 501c3 nonprofit that works countywide to improve the lives of people using drugs. Lu Funk, founder and director, said the organization offers a harm reduction program that provides people with rapid testing for HIV and Hepatitis C, bagged lunches and a needle exchange.

“For folks injecting drugs we do offer syringe access with a few different sizes of needles, so that people are more comfortable because we want people to be as successful as possible and be as safe as possible, if they are injecting drugs,” Funk said.

In addition to the needle exchange, Funk said the group also hands out cotton filters, alcohol swabs, mixers and offers a disposal service to ensure sterile conditions to reduce the risk of hepatitis C.

“We’re in an overdose epidemic in that we are having higher rates of overdose than we’ve seen before with heroin the main opiate of choice,” she added. “We run regular delivery routes every week in different areas in the county and people are expecting us every week.”

Funk said the group was started in Bisbee as an underground operation. Since SB1250 passed in 2021, which legalized needle exchanges, the group became more vocal about its services as well as partnering with the Cochise County Health Department to expand across the county.

“From May 2022 through May 2023, which was the first year of our contract with the Cochise County Health Department, we distributed 125,000 sterile syringes throughout the county and over 900 Sharps containers,” Funk said “We also distributed almost 10,000 doses of naloxone and we engaged in over 40,000 people across the county.”

She would like to see the settlement money go toward building a detox center as well as increasing harm reduction services.

“We need better access to naloxone, better access to Narcan, we need better access to sterile syringes,” she said. “We have really high rates of hepatitis C in this county that goes untreated and that’s something that’s preventable through the use of sterile injection equipment.”

In addition to the partnership with Cochise Harm Reduction, Thompson said the health department offers community health workers who work with individuals using drugs. It has a public health social worker stationed in the Cochise County jail and a medicine assisted treatment program in the jail for women who struggle with opioid use disorder.

The Chiricahua Community Health Center website said the Cochise County Sheriff’s Office recently received a grant to expand its resources to identify and treat incarcerated individuals struggling with an addiction disorder.

The survey will be open for responses through July 3. Thompson said anyone is eligible to take the survey and it is available in Spanish.

“We want everybody, you don’t like seeing homeless people tweaking on the street, take the survey,” Thompson said. “We’re trying to address the problem and we want to address it in the best way we can.”