Michigan Steps Up Harm Reduction to Combat Opioid Crisis

The state will provide prisoners medication-assisted treatment to treat opioid use disorder and is creating more syringe services programs.

December 5, 2019 By Benjamin Ryan

Responding to a state opioid crisis that leads to some five overdose deaths daily, Michigan has pledged to provide medication-assisted treatment (MAT) to treat opioid use disorder (OUD) among prisoners and to increase the number of syringe services programs (SSPs) in the state, the Detroit Free Press reports.

MAT includes methadone, Suboxone (buprenorphine) and Vivitrol (naltrexone), each of which reduces opioid cravings and mitigates withdrawal symptoms.

States across the nation are increasingly providing MAT to inmates. In Michigan, more than one in five prison inmates have OUD, so the need is great.

Earlier this year, a federal appeals court ruled that an inmate in a Maine jail had a right to receive MAT and that the state's withholding of the treatment constituted a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Such a finding is in keeping with the recent push to reframe OUD as a brain disorder rather than a behavioral one.

SSPs provide people who inject drugs with clean needles, syringes and access to Narcan (naloxone), the opioid-overdose-reversing drug. These programs can help prevent the spread of hepatitis C virus (HCV) and HIV through the sharing of drug injection equipment.

Between 2000 and 2018, annual diagnoses of HCV among Michigan residents younger than 40 years old increased 13-fold, from 292 to 3,774. More than four out of five of the diagnoses in 2018 were among people who reported a history of injecting drugs.

The Michigan Department of Corrections will first provide MAT to three men's prisons and then to a women's prison, with the ultimate goal of establishing universal access to MAT among state inmates by 2023.

Michigan will also increase its support for SSPs, raising the number of state agencies offering such programs from 13 to 25.

Additionally, Michigan is launching a media campaign that seeks to reduce the stigma surrounding OUD. The state is also lifting the requirement that physicians seek prior authorization for MAT treatments among those on Medicaid—a major push to ease access to the therapies.

To read the Detroit Free Press article, click here.

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