


As city drug overdoses dip, providers see more room for improvement

HEALTH PULSE TEAM 

The city Health Department said drug-overdose deaths fell 2.6% last year, to 1,444—the first decrease after seven consecutive years in which the total climbed higher.

Opioids were involved in 80% of those deaths, and fentanyl was the most common substance identified in overdoses, with the drug present in about 6 in 10 cases.

But the number of overdoses continued to climb in some areas of the city. The Bronx, Manhattan and Staten Island all had higher rates of overdose deaths in 2018 than in the previous year. The overdose rate fell 21%, to 273 deaths, in Brooklyn and 20.4%, to 215 deaths, in Queens.

Dr. Lawrence Brown, CEO of Start Treatment and Recovery Centers in Brooklyn, said it's not just deaths that the city should work on addressing but also access to care and retaining people in treatment.

"I'm glad it's going in the right direction," Brown said. "It's not quite to the point that as a clinician I really feel it. But still, even one fewer death is really an accomplishment."

The Bronx continued to have the highest overdose rate, 34.1 per 100,000 people, and the overdose rate increased 8.6% last year, with 391 Bronx residents dying in drug fatalities.

The neighborhoods hit hardest last year were East Harlem, which had an overdose death rate of 56.1 per 100,000 people; the Bronx's Crotona-Tremont, Hunts Point-Mott Haven and Fordham-Bronx Park; and South Beach-Tottenville on Staten Island.

Overdose deaths among Staten Island residents increased 17.5%, to 31.5 per 100,000 people, last year, the second-highest among the five boroughs.

"The decrease in drug-overdose deaths is promising, but far too many New Yorkers are still dying," Health Commissioner Dr. Oxiris Barbot said in a statement. "We are closely monitoring the trends of the epidemic as they evolve and responding to upticks in emergency department visits and deaths with targeted strategies and community engagement."

The city Health Department noted that it has invested \$60 million since March 2017 through HealingNYC to prevent overdoses. It has distributed 230,000 kits of naloxone, the drug used to reverse opioid overdoses.

Its Relay program, which deploys peer advocates to emergency departments, is in use at 12 hospitals, with three more slated to join next year.

Preliminary data for the first quarter of this year showed two fewer overdose deaths than during the same span last year.

Mary Callahan, director of outpatient services for Odyssey House, said it has had success reaching people through its state-funded recovery center in the Morris Heights section of the Bronx. There, it has a peer specialist who has experienced addiction and is able to go to bodegas, schools and community events to share that services are available. She said collaboration between treatment providers and the federally qualified health centers that serve Medicaid and uninsured patients could yield results.

"We now have the resources to go into the community rather than just setting up in the community and having folks come to us," Callahan said. "Over time we hope to see some of the fruits of the labor." —Jonathan LaMantia