

# The Star-Ledger

## **N.J. drug overdose deaths drop slightly, but thousands are still dying**

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The number of people who died from drug overdoses in New Jersey appears to be down for the first time in years.

About 3,021 people died of suspected drug-related overdoses last year, based on preliminary data. State officials said that was about a 3% decrease from 2018, when nearly 100 more people died during the ongoing opioid epidemic.

On average, more than eight people continue to die everyday.

“We finally are seeing a breaking in the curve,” Gov. Phil Murphy said Wednesday. But, he cautioned, “there’s no celebration.”

Opioid prescriptions were also down by more than 6%, authorities said. There were more than 3.9 million opioid prescriptions last year in the state, compared to more than 4.2 million in 2018, according to a statement from state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal.

New Jersey drug deaths had set records for four straight years. Before 2012, when officials started tracking those deaths, more than 1.5 billion prescription pain pills flooded the state from a relatively small number of pharmacies, which helped trigger a surge in drug addiction.

State officials announced the new numbers and discussed next steps during a roundtable event at the Family Guidance Center of Warren County, a treatment nonprofit in Washington Township.

Attempts by President Donald Trump’s administration to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, commonly known as “Obamacare,” threatened to cut the state off from badly needed federal funds, according to Carole Johnson, commissioner of the human services department.

But the state’s recent one-day giveaway of 32,000 doses of naloxone, an opioid antidote, was a positive step, she said. This week, Johnson reached out to police departments about distributing more doses, she said, and 80 had already responded.

Just on Tuesday, an off-duty corrections officer saved somebody’s life with naloxone, said Marcus Hicks, acting commissioner of the corrections department. Hicks said more than a quarter of the state’s prison population had addiction issues, and he was working to improve treatment behind bars.

In addition, the state attorney general's office is suing the Sackler family, founders of the drug manufacturing giant Purdue Pharma, which officials say deceptively marketed addictive painkillers.

Grewal said officers shut down 11 heroin "mills" last year and seized more than 4.5 million doses. He highlighted a program he began to redirect people arrested on drug charges to treatment, and he said thousands of high school athletes and their parents were now required to watch an educational video about opioids.

The governor also revived an idea to tax opioid manufacturers to help pay for addiction treatment.

Murphy said the state spent \$100 million each of the last two years to tackle the problem, and he suggested that he would be asking for money again in this year's budget, although he did not name a specific figure.

Overall, the governor said the state was on the right track.