

# Experts Address Rural Opioid Epidemic In Illinois

by Kevin Bessler

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(The Center Square) – A new report describes the impact of COVID-19 on the existing rural opioid epidemic in Illinois and addresses treatment to reduce fatalities.

Experts in the areas of health, law enforcement and public policy explored how the pandemic has impacted the rural opioid epidemic during a Rural Health Summit.

The report by SIU Medicine says while every area of the state faces opioid misuse, overdose deaths are a significant issue in rural counties.

According to the Illinois Department of Public Health, nine of the 20 Illinois counties with the highest opioid fatality rate are in rural areas.

“We have seen this opioid crisis unfold in stages and no doubt the rural parts of this state and this country have been tremendously negatively impacted,” said Illinois State Police Director Brendan Kelly during a recent rural health summit.

Kelly said education, treatment and enforcement are a three-legged stool that helps, but there is often no connection to social work or medical treatment.

Harrisburg physician Dr. Brent Jones said prescribing painkillers has always been a risky proposition.

“Over the years you had this dichotomy of trying to help people do well with their pain, trying to work their jobs, take care of their families and trying to live their lives,” said Jones. “In the midst of that, we know 20% of those people who have exposure to narcotics are going to become an addictive person.”

The group's recommendations included increasing the availability of Medications for Opioid Use Disorder centers, engage justice-involved populations to reduce opioid-use disorder, and expand harm reduction services into rural areas to prevent overdoses and the spread of infectious diseases.

The Centers for Disease Control announced Wednesday more than 100,000 people died of drug overdoses in the country during a 12-month period ending this past April, with opioids being the driving cause.

That is a new record high, with overdose deaths jumping over 28% from the same period a year earlier and nearly doubling over the past five years.

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