



THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON THE GREATER RICHMOND REGION

by

Opioid Epidemic Immersion Team 2020

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Introduction

The national opioid epidemic has not spared Virginia, as the CDC has reported a steady--and in some cases dramatic--increase in overdose fatalities of Virginians from prescriptions, synthetic opioids, and heroin over the last decade. In Richmond City, the rate of overdose deaths per 100,000 citizens is more than three times the national average. As leaders in the Greater Richmond community, we regularly encounter heart-breaking stories of neighbors, colleagues, and loved ones suffering from or succumbing to this rampant crisis.

Our Journey

Our immersion group held phone or in-person interviews with senior leaders from a number of regional nonprofits, agencies and organizations fighting the opioid epidemic in our region, including the McShin Foundation, CARITAS, The Healing Place, the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, VCU Health/VCU MOTIVATE Clinic, Henrico Area Mental Health & Developmental Services, Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, the Virginia Department of Medical Assistance Services, and Virginia Premier. We also consulted with the Opioid Immersion Group from the LMR Class of 2019 in an effort to build upon their knowledge base.

Findings

This research uncovered a number of observations about the nature of the epidemic in the region. Key needs, findings, and issues include:

- *The complexity of the network.* There are numerous parties that treat, prevent and/or educate the opioid epidemic in the Greater Richmond area. Although there is a lot of collaboration, the organizations can be siloed or specialized, which may create confusion for those seeking treatment.

- *Access and timeliness of data.* The majority of available data on the epidemic is from overdose fatalities as reported by local coroners' offices to the CDC. Real-time data is not readily available to those on the front lines.
- *The importance of ancillary support services in treatment.* A number of experts interviewed reported how important services like childcare, transportation, counseling, and housing vouchers are to the success of treatment programs.
- *Addressing underlying trauma.* Many persons suffering from opioid addiction, particularly younger people, report the abuse of prescriptions or illicit substances to address deeper emotional pain. Counseling is a crucial part of prevention and recovery.
- *The stigma of addiction.* Many experts reported that the perceptions of guilt and shame--not only among persons suffering from addiction but their friends and family as well--remain a major barrier that keeps people from seeking treatment.

But the most pertinent issue that we uncovered was more operational: Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, which is the largest provider of opioid abuse treatment in the Commonwealth, reported millions of dollars' worth of outstanding claims compensation for services that they say were pre-approved by insurance companies. We chose to focus on and investigate this claim because of how crucial RBHA is to the infrastructure of Virginia's opioid epidemic response, and since RBHA warned that without these payments they may need to eliminate programs that treat opioid addiction.

We determined that some claims may be getting flagged as "dirty" or incomplete by clearinghouse intermediaries that are processing claims between payers (insurance companies) and payees (in this case, RBHA). These flags may not be communicated "up" or "down" to either party, but effectively "reset the clock" on the window within which insurance companies are legally obligated to compensate claims.

Recommendations / Calls to Action

- 1) A push for greater transparency and improved communication between treatment providers, agency coalitions, and healthcare companies.
- 2) Continued analysis comparing ARTS benefit language against other markets to identify opportunities to streamline payment.
- 3) Staying current on past and present State and Federal commissions, task forces, and policies.
- 4) If appropriate, considering working with a congressional sponsor to introduce legislation that improves access to services and data.

Additional Sources

- [CDC.go](https://www.cdc.gov)
- [CurbtheCrisis.com](https://www.curbthecrisis.com)
- Governor Northam's Advisory Committee on Opioids
- Henrico County Heroin Task Force Goals & History
- [OpioidSolutionsRVA.com](https://www.opioidsolutionsrva.com)
- Washington Post Pain Pill Map & Database