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Expert Panel Recommends Evidence-Based Public Health Initiatives to Address the Opioid Crisis

Findings and Recommendations Intended to Inform Master Settlement Negotiators, Congress, and Other Federal, State, and Local Policy Makers

November 1, 2019 – The national conversation around the opioid epidemic was advanced today with the release of a new report, **“Bringing Science to Bear on Opioids.”** Prepared by an expert panel formed by the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH), the exhaustively researched report features dozens of recommendations to address the opioid crisis in the United States. The ASPPH Task Force on Public Health Initiatives to Address the Opioid Crisis said, “If a master settlement agreement is reached in the multi-district litigation currently pending, funds should be used not only to compensate states and communities for expenditures related to the epidemic, but also to prevent it from spreading, ameliorate associated harms, and contain related epidemics.”

The report and related resources are available online at: [ASPPH.org/opioids](https://aspvh.org/opioids).

Detailing the scope of the opioid epidemic in the United States, the panel’s report notes that more Americans die each year from opioid overdoses than died in any armed conflict since the end of World War II; on average, 130 Americans die each day from an opioid overdose; and, overdose is now the leading cause of unintentional injury death, surpassing motor vehicle deaths. Experts cited in the new expert report predict that, without strong efforts to mitigate the problem, the annual number of opioid overdose deaths will reach 82,000 in the year 2025, bringing the total death toll to 700,000 over the 10-year period from 2016-2025.

The Task Force advocates an evidence-based approach, recommending that settlement funds (either directly or indirectly) be directed to initiatives supported by published and peer-reviewed scientific research findings. All recommendations offered by the panel are backed by research cited in the report. The dozens of recommendations have been grouped as follows in the report:

- Recommendations to strengthen the collection of evidence and epidemiological data on all dimensions of the opioid epidemic;
- Initiatives to combat stigma, which the panel found continues to present significant barriers to effective prevention, treatment, and harm reduction efforts;
- Legislative and regulatory changes to ensure access to medications for opioid use disorder;
- Harm reduction initiatives to reduce the impact of opioid use disorder on users, their families, and their communities;
- Efforts to advance primary prevention;
- Research areas that need additional support in order to provide additional evidence for addressing the crisis; and,
- A major new initiative to advance program evaluation and implementation science to help ensure that resources are expended wisely and that patients receive the most effective treatments given their history and situation.

In releasing the report, Sandro Galea, MD, DrPH, MPH, chair of the ASPPH Board of Directors, and dean, Boston University School of Public Health, said, “We believe the Task Force’s recommendations, if implemented and adequately resourced, will help advance the treatment of people currently suffering from opioid use disorder, greatly reduce the number of citizens misusing opioids in the future, and begin to heal communities devastated by the opioid crisis.”

The chair of the Task Force, Robert P. Pack, PhD, MPH, associate dean for academic affairs, East Tennessee State University College of Public Health, said, “The opioid crisis is a local, national, and global public health issue that touches all levels of society. The Task Force’s recommendations stress the critical need to reach across sectors and engage all possible resources to address the opioid epidemic and reduce associated harms.”

The Task Force’s recommendations were made within the context of the following foundational principles, upon which Task Force members agreed during the initial phase of their deliberations:

- The opioid crisis is a public health issue that must be addressed in many diverse sectors including healthcare, the criminal legal system, workforce, and economic and community development;
- Opioid use disorder (OUD -- i.e. opioid addiction) is a chronic, relapsing brain disorder characterized by continued substance use despite negative consequences;
- The opioid crisis was exacerbated, if not caused by a multi-faceted pharmaceutical industry marketing campaign that minimized opioid risks, encouraged aggressive use, and led to a dramatic increase in opioid prescribing;
- Social determinants of health, such as racial/ethnic and economic disparities in access to care, and corporate determinants of health, such as deceptive marketing of pharmaceutical products, must be addressed to solve the problem;
- It is crucial that related policies and programs be aligned with guiding principles of public health, such as the primacy of health and well-being for individuals and communities; dignity for all affected; equality of access; and respect for diverse values, cultures, and beliefs;

- Resources gleaned from criminal actions or settlements should be used to mitigate the opioid epidemic and prevent similar crises from occurring in the future; and
- The scale of the synergistic epidemics of OUD, hepatitis B and C, HIV, and suicide calls for a response similar to the highly successful Ryan White Care Act, a multi-pronged public health approach to the AIDS epidemic.

In welcoming the report, ASPPH President and Chief Executive Officer Laura Magaña, PhD, said, “The Association has a key strategic objective to champion the engagement of academic public health and the use of evidence-based science — across all professions and sectors — to solve the critical challenges facing our communities. The sharp increase in the prevalence of opioid use disorder in the United States is exactly the type of critical challenge that demands the engagement of academic public health faculty as well as the use of evidence in related policy initiatives. The Task Force’s report and recommendations are a major contribution to advancing efforts to treat and prevent the abuse of opioids.”

The **Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health** (ASPPH) is the voice of accredited Academic public health, representing more than 120 schools and programs accredited by the Council on Education for Public Health. ASPPH is a 501c3 membership organization headquartered in Washington, DC. The Association’s mission is to strengthen the capacity of its members by advancing leadership, excellence and collaboration for academic public health. The ASPPH’s Strategic Framework 2020 calls for the Association to advocate for public health education, research, practice, and the public’s health by championing the engagement of academic public health and the use of evidence-based science—across all professions and sectors—to solve the critical challenges facing our communities.