

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Distributing Test Strips A Welcome Step in Fighting Fentanyl Crisis

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Fox News recently reported that Arizona is handing out fentanyl test strips to county health departments to help combat surging drug overdose deaths. So far, the state has distributed the strips to six counties, while Maricopa County is getting test strips directly from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

This is a smart move. After Arizona overdose deaths jumped an estimated 48% during the first eight months of 2020 – and rose 32% in Maricopa County in all of 2020 – lawmakers decided to embrace the strategy known as “harm reduction.”

Harm-reduction strategies begin with the realistic and nonjudgmental premise “there has never been, and will never be, a drug-free society.” Akin to the credo of the medical profession – “First, do no harm” – harm reduction seeks to avoid measures that exacerbate the harms the black market inflicts on nonmedical users and to focus strictly reducing the spread of disease and death from drug use.

In May 2021 the Legislature passed a bill to remove fentanyl test strips from the state’s list of legally prohibited drug paraphernalia, and Gov. Doug Ducey signed it into law.

Fentanyl test strips, made by a Canadian biotechnology company, were designed for urine drug screening. The Food and Drug Administration has not approved them for sale in U.S. drugstores or other outlets, but harm reduction groups have been handing them out to IV drug users who use them “off-label” to test heroin, cocaine and other drugs for fentanyl.

Users break off a small piece of a pill, dissolve it in water, and test it with the strip. If the drug is in powdered or liquid form, testing is even easier. Researchers claim the tests strips are highly accurate and can detect up to 10 fentanyl variants that cartels make and smuggle. They also find they save lives by causing drug users to use smaller amounts and/or take a drug more slowly when they detect it contains fentanyl.

Also in May 2021, Arizona legislators passed and Gov. Ducey signed a bill that further modified the state's drug paraphernalia law, so harm reduction groups can run "syringe services programs," (SSPs), also known as "needle exchange" programs. SSPs do more than provide clean needles and syringes to prevent the spread of HIV, hepatitis, and other infections. They also provide fentanyl test strips, cleaning materials, offer HIV and hepatitis screening, and refer people to drug rehab.

SSPs are endorsed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the CDC and the American Medical Association. Dr. Jerome Adams, Donald Trump's surgeon general, visited Arizona in 2019 to promote SSPs.

This pivot to harm reduction comes after years of fighting drug deaths with interdiction and law enforcement.

In 2018, Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh reported the overdose rate has been rising exponentially since the late 1970s. A new report in the Journal of the American Medical Association predicts the U.S. may be heading toward an even larger wave of overdose deaths.

All this despite a 60% drop in opioid prescribing from 2011 to 2020. Furthermore, the Drug Enforcement Administration places quotas on the manufacturing of prescription opioids and ratchets them downward year after year.

By 2019, reduced prescribing led the DEA to announce that less than 1% of controlled substances distributed to retail purchasers were getting diverted. Opioid prescriptions are the wrong target.

Now there are news reports of the growing presence of nitazenes – synthetic opioids 10 to 20 times more potent than fentanyl – in the mix of street drugs.

Drug prohibition incentivizes cartels to create more potent and powerful drugs. More potent forms can be more easily smuggled and divided into more portions to sell.

Waging the drug war with the same tactics that have failed for the past 50 years and expecting a different result is the definition of insanity. Arizona's recent turn to harm reduction is a welcome step in the right direction.

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