



Whitmer plans to cut opioid overdoses by 50 percent in five years

Scott McClallen

November 15, 2019

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer wants to cut opioid overdoses by 50 percent in five years through medication-assisted treatment (MAT) to prison inmates and **syringe exchange programs**.

“Addiction is not a moral failing; it is a disease,” Whitmer said at a Thursday press conference in Lansing, adding the chronic disease can be prevented.

Inmates will have access to methadone, naltrexone and buprenorphine, drugs that bind opioid receptors and reduce opioid cravings and withdrawal symptoms.

Jeffrey A. Singer, senior fellow of Health Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank, told The Center Square that addiction specialists agree MAT has the highest success rate in treating opioid addictions and reducing overdoses.

Methadone, taken orally, is long-acting because it absorbs through the digestive system and won’t get the user high, depending on the user’s tolerance.

Singer argued that addiction is a disease characterized by “compulsive use despite negative consequences,” even if the addiction rips apart that person’s life.

Singer said drug abstinence as a solution to addiction has a 7 percent to 10 percent success rate.

Many prisons make inmates quit opioids cold-turkey, causing “horrible withdrawals,” Singer said, and inmates walk out of prison when released to find more heroin because their underlying addiction issues were never addressed.

That’s why MAT should be combined with therapy, Singer said.

An offender is 40 times to 120 more times likely to die of an opioid overdose within the first two weeks of their release, according to state-provided materials.

“When a person is addicted, they need help,” Singer said.

Nearly all addicts have a history of trauma, Singer said, and about 50 percent have a genetic predisposition to addiction, and roughly 60 percent have a psycho-neurologic co-morbidities, such as autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

A Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration **report** estimated 77 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals with an opioid use disorder relapse within three months of release with tragic results.

That's because those recently released from prison lost their drug tolerance but use the same dose as when they had a higher tolerance, Singer said.

Methadone crushes those problems and provides addicts time to put their lives back together and seek therapy to treat problems pushing them to abuse opioids, he added.

Critics to MAT in prisons say inmates will sell or trade buprenorphine.

"A lot of drug addicts want help, but the shortage of doctors due to X-waivers or methadone rules can cause six-week waits, so they go to the black market," Singer said.

The Michigan Department of Corrections said it will pilot the MAT programs in three prisons – Central Michigan Correctional Facility in St. Louis, Carson City Correctional Facility, and Charles Egeler Reception and Guidance Center in Jackson – with plans to expand to other facilities by 2023.

More than 20 percent of Michigan prison inmates have an opioid addiction, according to information provided by the state, which said MAT is 40-75 percent effective in helping individuals break an addiction.

Whitmer cut two opioid-related budget items totaling \$1.2 million from Michigan's 2020 fiscal budget.