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Press Release

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Health Department Launches Law-Enforcement Driven Deflection and Naloxone Distribution Initiative to Fight Opioid Overdose

FOREST PARK, IL –Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle and the Cook County Department of Public Health (CCDPH) today officially launched a comprehensive initiative to prevent opioid overdose deaths and help people with opioid use disorder find community-based treatment and support in suburban Cook County.

“No matter where law enforcement and other first responders work, they invariably encounter and respond to the impacts of drug use and co-occurring disorders in their communities,” said Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle. “This keeps people with opioid use disorder out of jail and the emergency room, and provides resources and support in a compassionate way.”

The opioid initiative has four major components:

- Technical assistance to establish deflection programs for suburban Cook County law enforcement agencies. Deflection refers people with opioid use and substance use disorder to community-based treatment as an alternative to incarceration or the emergency room.
- Training on opioid overdose and naloxone use for law enforcement agencies.
- Distribution of naloxone to priority law enforcement agencies and community partners.
- Quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis on opioid overdose and opioid use disorder to inform public health efforts.

“Thanks to the leadership of CCDPH, 12 police departments and communities will be starting new deflection programs, which is the largest single cluster of deflection sites ever conceived, created, and launched in such a short period of time in the nation,” said Jac Charlier, executive director for the Center for Health and Justice, the

technical assistance arm of Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities (TASC). TASC, will provide tailored, no-cost technical assistance to law enforcement agencies in CCDPH's jurisdiction of suburban Cook County.

"This initiative is a huge first step toward bringing deflection to scale, moving up the point in time at which people at risk of overdose can access treatment," said Charlier. "When used effectively, deflection can save lives, reduce drug use, and build community trust while promoting public safety."

People who are referred by law enforcement into deflection programs will be supported by deflection specialists. Deflection specialists support people with substance use disorder in getting to their first treatment appointment as well as addressing housing, transportation, employment, and other barriers to staying in treatment.

Harvey, Markham and Maywood police departments participated in a pilot program for this initiative. As of Wednesday, Dec. 9, CCDPH and its partners have trained 78 officers and distributed 169 naloxone kits.

Maywood's 60153 zip code, which also includes Broadview, has one of the highest mortality rates for opioid overdose in suburban Cook County. "We have used naloxone on 42 incidents," said Maywood Police Chief Talley. "Our officers use naloxone to reverse overdoses weekly, and sometimes more than once a week."

In Markham, explained Chief White, "My officers have been buying naloxone out of their own pocket. I have too. Then of course, the price went up. We're grateful for the support." He added that, "We want to establish a deflection program in Markham because our first priority as a police department is to help people. We don't want to be locking people up just because of dependency."

"Harvey's officers were already engaging in deflection, before we knew what it was called," said Harvey Police Chief Collins. "Sometimes people just need support, and it doesn't always have to end in an arrest. Arrest is placing them in a cycle and sets them up for failure. Deflection may be that exit ramp."

The City of Harvey's police department received technical assistance from TASC through a previous grant. The CCDPH initiative provides support for implementing their plans. "Our work with TASC has allowed the department to identify more community resources and to formalize those relationships," said Chief Collins. "This supports not just people who are at risk of opioid overdose, but it helps bring resources to commercial sex workers and victims of human trafficking. There's a broader impact."

CCDPH will coordinate with treatment providers, harm reduction advocates, community-based partners, researchers, and other government agencies to carry out the initiative. Cook County Department of Emergency Management and Regional Solutions (DEMRS) will help promote CCDPH's initiatives to law enforcement partners. The initiative builds on a DEMRS program to train 30 law enforcement agencies in the Western suburbs on naloxone administration. CCDPH and TASC will

also convene regional taskforces in the south and west suburbs to bring together partners and identify mutual resources for people with opioid use and substance use disorder. The initiative is supported by federal and state grant dollars.

“This epidemic within a pandemic requires a comprehensive approach that engages diverse partners across suburban Cook County,” said CCDPH Senior Medical Officer and Co-lead Dr. Kiran Joshi. “In addressing this crisis, we knew we had to start with saving lives, but we also had to transform the broken systems that traumatize our communities, destroy families, and perpetuate opioid use and substance use disorder.”

On December 16, between 9 a.m. and 10:30 a.m., TASC will host a virtual orientation on deflection for suburban Cook County law enforcement agencies interested in participating in the program. The training will cover the value of deflection and how to identify individuals that are appropriate for deflection. To register for TASC’s virtual orientation on December 16, please contact Nikki Munoz at nmunoz@tasc.org.

For information about CCDPH’s opioid overdose prevention initiative, or to request naloxone, visit the CCDPH website at:

<https://cookcountypublichealth.org/behavioral-health/opioids/>