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IDHS Announces Release of Community Engagement Project Report and Next Steps for Opioid Overdose Prevention Sites in Chicago

Next steps in overdose prevention site planning will begin on the Chicago's West Side neighborhood

CHICAGO - Today, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) announced the release of the Overdose Prevention Site (OPS) Community Engagement Project Report and next steps for Opioid Overdose Prevention Sites on Chicago's West Side neighborhood. IDHS, the Prevention Partnership/West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force, and Advocates for Human Potential completed the report, which found that 86% of Chicago's West Side community members believed an OPS would be beneficial to their West Side communities. Efforts for creating an OPS will begin with the creation of a community advisory council to guide community education and engagement efforts and OPS planning activities.

"We are excited to announce the next steps in this extremely important initiative in one of the most highly affected areas for overdoses in Illinois," said IDHS Secretary Grace B. Hou. "This is the next step in the Overdose Prevention Site Community Engagement Project that Governor Pritzker announced in his executive order earlier this year and Chicago's West Side neighborhood can absolutely benefit from these health centers that directly address opioid misuse."

Chicago's West Side neighborhood has one the highest fatal and non-fatal opioid overdose rates in Illinois. Illinois Department of Public Health data shows that there were a total of 2,408 fatal and non-fatal opioid overdoses in Chicago's West Side neighborhood in 2018, and a total of 2,568 fatal and non-fatal opioid overdoses in 2019. In Chicago, the rate of overdose deaths from 2017 to 2019 increased among non-Hispanic Blacks, Hispanic/Latinx individuals, and people in high economic hardship communities. Austin and North Lawndale were two of the communities with the highest number of overdose deaths in 2018. The majority of these deaths involved heroin and heroin mixed or tainted with fentanyl. According to preliminary opioid overdose-related hospital and opioid overdose-related emergency department visits data, the disparities are continuing to rise in 2020, impacting some of the same communities. The

emergency department visits rate is 6.3x higher in Black populations than Latinx populations, 7.4x higher than White populations, and 7.5x higher than Native American populations.

“I would like to thank the Prevention Partnership/West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force and IDHS for their important work in our community in Chicago’s West Side neighborhood,” said Representative LaShawn K. Ford. “I’m really excited to report the positive responses we received from West Side residents to our survey that an OPS would be beneficial and provide increased access to substance use treatment and recovery support services. I look forward to working with our teams on the next steps to open an OPS for our residents who need it most.”

Overdose prevention sites (OPS) are legally sanctioned health service facilities that allow people to use pre-obtained drugs under the supervision of trained staff. OPS give people a safe, clean place to use their drugs and staff who can step in immediately and respond if an overdose occurs. Studies show that an OPS can reduce overdoses, improve public safety, reduce infectious disease risks, and connect people to substance use treatment and recovery support services. Sanctioned OPSs are an asset to the community as health centers that are staffed by health professionals and offer a variety of immediate health services to people who use drugs, such as Hepatitis vaccinations and services that can reduce the harms of drug use.

The OPS Community Engagement Project met the objectives of Governor Pritzker’s Executive Order 2020-02, by engaging West Side community members in discussions about overdose health concerns and a potential OPS strategy response. Led by the Prevention Partnership/West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force and funded by IDHS’s Division of Substance Use Prevention and Recovery, project activities focused on reaching out to West Side residents, business owners, faith leaders, healthcare and social service providers, law enforcement, elected officials, people in recovery, and those who are actively using opioids, providing information about OPSs, obtaining their input on concerns related to OPSs, and promoting community buy-in. Project activities were conducted from March-June of this year and included convening a 23-member local expert panel to guide the project.

Key findings included:

- 86% of survey respondents reported that an OPS would be beneficial for the West Side. Potential benefits include reduced overdose deaths, reduced public drug use and infectious disease risks, improved public safety, and increased access to substance use treatment and recovery support services.
- 22% of survey respondents reported that they had concerns that an OPS would increase crime, drug selling, public drug use and opioid overdoses on the West Side.

Project next steps include:

- Creating a community advisory council to guide community education and engagement efforts and OPS planning activities.

- Meeting with West Side business leaders and service providers to discuss how the OPS can be staffed and managed by community members and to address OPS funding and sustainability concerns.
- Collecting survey and focus group data from the West Side's growing Latinx community.
- Convening focus groups with residents whose families have lived on the West Side for several generations and law enforcement to obtain their input on OPSs and learn about their concerns about having an OPS on the West Side.
- Holding open house events once Illinois moves into Phase 5 of COVID-19 recovery that include a model OPS that community members can tour.
- Sharing data in community education documents and at open house events on how OPSs have helped communities that are similar to the West Side.

Click here to read the full report and analysis of the Overdose Prevention Site Community Engagement Project: <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/OneNetLibrary/27896/documents/OPS.pdf>.