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City and State Partner on New Program to Offer Immediate Treatment For Opioid Use Disorder

Hotline will provide immediate access to life-saving medications regardless of insurance or ability to pay

CHICAGO - Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) Commissioner Allison Arwady, M.D. and Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Substance Use Prevention and Recovery (IDHS/SUPR) Director Laura Garcia announced today the launch of a new pilot program to offer immediately available medication to Chicagoans to treat opioid use disorder (OUD). Medication-assisted recovery (MAR) involves the use of FDA-approved medications for the treatment of OUD and with the launch of the MAR NOW pilot program, a new hotline will make treatment more accessible than ever.

MAR NOW is a collaboration between CDPH, IDHS/SUPR, and treatment provider Family Guidance Centers, Inc., which has been providing medication assisted recovery (MAR) in Chicago for over 50 years. MAR NOW operates through the existing 24/7 Illinois Helpline for Opioids and Other Substances.

Starting on May 19, when an individual in Chicago calls the Helpline looking for treatment for opioid use disorder, they can now be transferred directly to Family Guidance Centers to receive immediate MAR. MAR NOW will provide direct connection to a care coordinator and provider between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. 7 days a week via the Illinois Helpline. After hours, individuals can leave a message with the MAR NOW care coordinators and receive a call back the next day. A Family Guidance care coordinator will help them determine the best treatment options and can connect them to a provider for an immediate telephone appointment and medication prescription. Care coordinators can also facilitate a same- or next-day in-person appointment. All patients are connected to ongoing treatment with a community provider that best meets their needs.

“Chicago is in the midst of an overdose crisis, as more people die each year in the City from opioid overdose than from gun-related homicides and traffic accidents combined,” said Chicago

Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot. “Addressing this crisis requires us to prioritize harm reduction, lower barriers to treatment and invest in innovative public health programs like MAR NOW, which will increase access to life-saving treatment for so many of our residents.”

Although MAR is the standard of care for opioid addiction, only 20-30% of people diagnosed with opioid use disorder nationwide receive this treatment. Traditionally, access to methadone, buprenorphine, or naltrexone, the medications used to treat opioid use disorder, were only available after an in-person appointment with a provider able to prescribe these medications. Appointments, if they are available and affordable, often require a wait of several days to weeks. This can be an insurmountable barrier for someone ready to access treatment immediately. Moreover, strict federal regulations around the storage and prescription of these medications further restrict access, making it challenging for providers to offer low-barrier treatment.

MAR NOW changes all of this. The program takes advantage of COVID-induced changes to federal regulations that allow patients to begin treatment at home after an initial telephonic appointment with a provider. This will vastly expand access to opioid use disorder treatment by providing immediate, easy access to MAR: an individual can speak directly with a provider over the phone, immediately receive a prescription or same-day in-person appointment, and get transportation assistance to the pharmacy or clinic, all at the same time.

“When possible, IDHS/SUPR supports the use of medications as part of treatment and other recovery supports as the preferred approach to treat opioid use disorder,” said Director Garcia.

With the launch today, MAR NOW is being piloted only in Chicago. IDHS/SUPR plans to evaluate the pilot program for possible expansion statewide.

“The primary goal of this program is to save lives,” said Nicole Gastala, M.D., IDHS/SUPR’s Medical Director. “Immediate access to medication for opioid use disorder is not only an effective treatment, it is an overdose prevention intervention. Patients receiving MAR have a substantially lowered risk of overdose. The sooner we can get someone access to MAR when they are ready for it, the better chance we have of preventing overdose.”

1,302 people died of an opioid overdose in Chicago in 2020, a 52% increase over 2019 and the highest number ever recorded in the City. Most overdoses in Chicago occur among males and non-Latinx Black populations. Overdose is one of the leading causes of the 10-year life expectancy gap between Black and white Chicagoans, a gap which widened during the pandemic. Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced the U.S. surpassed 107,000 deaths from drug overdoses in 2021, an all-time high and a 15 percent increase from the previous record set in 2020.

“While overdose affects every single community in Chicago, we know that it disproportionately impacts Black communities. Lowering barriers to treatment and ensuring that all Chicagoans

have access to the highest quality, evidence-based treatment is vital to advancing health equity,” said Dr. Arwady.

MAR NOW care coordinators will provide ongoing care coordination and follow-up with patients who call the MAR NOW hotline, to ensure that patients can access their medications at the pharmacy and make it to their appointments with community providers. The program serves all patients, regardless of insurance status or ability to pay. If someone can’t afford their prescription, Family Guidance Centers will ensure that they have access at no cost. Patients will also receive transportation via rideshare or bus passes to the pharmacy and to their follow-up appointments as needed.

“There are so many barriers to accessing treatment. Once someone has decided that they are ready for treatment, we must do everything we can to support them,” said Maria Bruni, PhD, Senior Vice President at Family Guidance Centers. “At Family Guidance, we have seen tremendous improvements in treatment retention since we began providing transportation. We are also able to offer ongoing case management, including referral to primary care and mental health services and insurance enrollment. We are committed to doing everything we can to surround our patients with all of the supports they need to work towards their recovery goals.”

The Illinois Helpline for Opioids and Other Substances is a free statewide resource available 24/7 through the Illinois Department of Human Services. Call 833-234-6343 or text “HELP” to 833234 to contact the Helpline.

IL Helpline: <https://helplineil.org/app/home>

CDPH Overcome Opioids: <https://overcomeopioids.org/>

Chicago Health Atlas Overdose Data: <https://chicagohealthatlas.org/indicators/drug-overdose-deaths>

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