

Saving Ourselves: Combating the Opioid Overdose Epidemic in African American Communities

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In the 1980s and 1990s, major cities in the United States were plagued by the crack epidemic, resulting in a number of socioeconomic consequences, many of which had a huge impact on the African American community. This included increases in crime, tough crime policies, and a rise in incarceration with sentencing disparities (Alexander, 2012; Evans, Garthwaite, & Moore, 2018; U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, 2006). In a 2018 study, Evans et al found that the murder rate of young black males doubled soon after the start of the crack epidemic and that these rates were still 70 percent higher 17 years later. The study also estimated that eight percent of the murders in 2000 was due to long term effects of the crack epidemic, with elevated murder rates among young black males, explaining a significant part of the gap in life expectancy between black and white males (Evans et al, 2018).

Over 20 years later, this epidemic has re-emerged with opioid misuse and overdose. The opioid overdose epidemic has transformed the face of drug abuse and addiction and sparked public concern once it became a huge issue among non-minorities. It has gotten national attention since it has reached new communities in America, but this time the focus is treatment and prevention instead of criminalization. Opioid overdose affects thousands of Americans each year. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), opioid overdose killed 42,000 Americans in 2016 (CDC, 2016). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that more than 130 deaths daily are related to opioid overdose (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). During 2014, the rate of drug overdose deaths increased significantly for both sexes, as well as people between 25–44 years old and greater than 55 years, non-

Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks, and in the Northeastern, Midwestern, and Southern regions of the United States (CDC, 2016). More importantly, in recent years, the drug death rate is rising most steeply among African-Americans nationally, with many falling victims to fentanyl. According to the CDC, among blacks in urban counties, deaths rose by 41 percent in 2016 (CDC, 2018). It has been stated that in recent years increases in opioid prescriptions like morphine, Percocet, and Oxycontin have been a major factor in opioid addiction or accidental overdose, however, there has been a recent surge in illicit opioid overdose deaths, driven largely by heroin and fentanyl (CDC, 2016; CDC, 2017).

According to the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), in 2015, opioid overdose opioid death rates in New York were as high as 26.7 (per 100,000 population) in one area, with rates of 8.8 in the Bronx and 6.1 in Brooklyn (NYSDOH, 2017). In 2017, the rate for opioid overdose-related emergency room visits was 25.4 in New York, with alarming rates in Brooklyn (22.1), the Bronx (39.2), and New York City (25.4) (NYSDOH, 2019a). In 2017, New York was included on the list of states with statistically significant increases in drug overdose death rates from 2016 to 2017 (CDC, 2018). The NYSDOH has responded to this growing opioid public health crisis by establishing Opioid Overdose Prevention Programs to support statewide prevention efforts, including improving timely opioid overdose reporting to key stakeholders (NYSDOH, 2019b). As a result of these alarming statistics, we, the Greater New York City Chapter of the National Black Nurses Association, thought that it was crucial to register as a New York State Opioid Overdose Prevention Program. This allows us to train individuals in our community on how to administer Naloxone (Narcan), a safe and effective antidote for all opioid-related overdoses, to individuals who may have experienced an opioid/heroin overdose and prevent it from becoming fatal. Since establishing our program in September of 2018, we have provided 2 community trainings, with many more to come.

Health care providers can be instrumental in educating community members about ways to combat this epidemic in the African American community by bringing awareness to this health crisis and provoke dialogue about solutions to end it. Intensifying efforts to improve safer prescribing of opioids is essential, however, healthcare providers a part of professional organizations like the National Black Nurses Association can aid in reversing the epidemic of opioid drug overdose deaths and prevent opioid-related morbidity by establishing themselves as Opioid Overdose Prevention Programs. By expanding access to and use of naloxone, this can protect persons already dependent on opioids from an overdose. Our hope is that chapters can work collaboratively to examine the impact of this crisis in their region and develop a rapid and effective response that can address this public health threat. In addition, continued national and chapter advocacy in support of appropriate budgets for legislation like the SUPPORT Act (Substance Use Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid



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Recovery for Patients and Communities), passed by the 115th Congress in 2018, and other legislative initiatives aimed at addressing the opioid epidemic is critical in resolving this crisis.

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