



OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

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Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Services to Distribute 1,600 Fentanyl Testing Strips to Help Prevent Opioid-Related Deaths

Bi-partisan resolution from local leaders legalizes distribution of testing strips

MILWAUKEE – [Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Services](#) (BHS) will distribute 1,600 fentanyl testing strips in the community as part of its ongoing effort to prevent deaths related to opioid use. These life-saving strips, from the Milwaukee Health Department, detect the presence of fentanyl in powders or injectables and can help prevent accidental overdoses.

According to the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner’s Office, 560 people died from drug overdoses in 2021. Of those 560, fentanyl, either alone or in combination with other drugs, resulted in 79 percent of drug overdose deaths.

“Under Wisconsin law, fentanyl testing strips are considered drug paraphernalia and are illegal to possess by both community members and first responders; however, they are a crucial, life-saving resource,” said Milwaukee County Supervisor Sylvia Ortiz-Velez. “Without access to these testing strips, drug users risk overdose from the otherwise undetectable presence of fentanyl, which is why I am so passionate about the legalization of these strips and proud that bipartisan legislation has accomplished that goal.”

In 2021, Supervisor Ortiz-Velez and Senator Lena Taylor co-authored a resolution that would decriminalize fentanyl testing strips. As a result of their work, on Jan. 25, 2022, both the Wisconsin State Senate and Assembly passed a bill that would decriminalize the testing strips. Governor Evers provided the final sign-off today, DATE.

“The opioid epidemic continues to rage on, and the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an outsized impact on every aspect of our lives -- including accessing the necessary care and tools to prevent overdose deaths. It was clear the law needed to change in order to save lives, and I’m thankful for champions in the State Assembly and State Senate who fought to legalize fentanyl testing strips and help prevent future drug overdoses,” said Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley. “It’s going to take all of us working together to prevent overdoses and make sure that people know there are local resources available to help them. I look forward to working with our



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partners to quickly get these strips into the hands of community members and emergency personnel who need them most.”

“The testing strips will be a valuable tool to help prevent death from overdose. I applaud the work of Supervisor Ortiz-Velez to make these strips available and easily accessible to the community,” said Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services Director Shakita LaGrant-McClain. “The most important step is keeping people alive so they can get the treatment and help to give them the best quality of life possible.”

In addition, Milwaukee County DHHS and BHS have a variety of community-based resources, including Access Clinics, crisis mobile teams, residential facilities and more that provide care and treatment for individuals experiencing a mental health or substance use disorder (SUD) crisis. This community-based approach provides patient-centered, culturally appropriate care to those who need it most.

“While the pandemic has made it difficult for the City-County Heroin, Opioid and Cocaine Task Force to meet, progress is being made to curb the rate of overdose deaths,” said Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Services Administrator Mike Lappen. “This legislation proves that all of the effort and lobbying by people who are passionate about reforms and innovation will lead to positive change. The right decisions are being made, and Milwaukee County continues to be at the forefront by providing cutting-edge care to our community members.”

A plan to distribute the testing strips is under development and will be rolled out in the coming weeks.

For more information and to learn more about available SUD resources, please visit <https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/DHHS/BHD>. If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health or SUD crisis, call the Milwaukee County 24/7 crisis line at 414-257-7222.

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About Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Services

[Behavioral Health Services](#) provides care and treatment to adults, children, and adolescents with mental illness, substance use disorders, and intellectual disabilities through both County-operated programs and contracts with community agencies. Services include intensive short-term treatment through crisis services and inpatient services, as well as a full array of supportive community services for persons with serious mental illness and substance use disorders.

About the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services

The mission of the [Milwaukee County Department of Health & Human Services](#) (DHHS) is to enhance the quality of life for individuals who need support living healthy, independent, and safe lives within the Milwaukee community. DHHS’ vision is to be recognized as the public model of excellence, leadership, and partnership in human services driving superior outcomes for our community.