**COVID-19 Fallout: A Spike in Opioid Deaths**OSF HealthCare Newsroom
Shelli Dankoff – Media Relations Supervisor

The headlines grabbed your attention: drug overdose deaths spiked dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the acting head of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy Regina LaBelle, 88,000 people in the U.S. died from a drug overdose between September 2019 and August 2020, about a 27% increase over the year before. The [data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm) includes the first six months of the pandemic. Those between 35 and 44 appear to be the most at risk of dying.

While the numbers may be shocking, for some they weren’t surprising.

**SOT Jerry Storm, Senior Vice President Pharmacy Services – OSF HealthCare**(With the pandemic everybody's isolated, you’ve got a downturn in the economy and you had people unemployed. So when you're isolated and overdosing, even if you gave them Narcan there’s not going to be anyone there to help, to administer it, to reverse it. It’s the perfect storm with those three ingredients. :23)

**SOT Cheryl Crowe, Vice President Behavioral Health - OSF HealthCare**(People who were seeking treatment often didn't have it available. Other people who were really on the edge, who we knew were at risk, then started using substances as a way to cope better, to deal with this - the loneliness, the isolation, anxiety and depression. :22)

Their jobs within OSF HealthCare make Cheryl Crowe and Jerry Storm keenly aware of a drug crisis that the Peoria, Illinois-based health care Ministry has been working to address for years. Crowe says they were just starting to make great steps forward in their efforts – reducing the amount of opioids prescribed, getting treatment strategies in place – and then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, sending everything backwards. Recovery has been slow.

**SOT Cheryl Crowe, Vice President Behavioral Health - OSF HealthCare**(We know that about one in four individuals struggles with a mental health issue, addiction - substance abuse disorder - being a part of that. Right now it's looking like one in three individuals are struggling so those numbers are growing. I think we've done better with our prescribing practices but what we're seeing is the volume of patients in need and a lot of people due to social isolation may have resorted to this as a coping mechanism at greater numbers than before. I wish I could quantify it. I just know that our overdoses when we look at our ED volumes are continuing to grow. :36)

With 14 hospitals across Illinois and the upper peninsula of Michigan, about half of them serving more rural areas, the drugs being used are as varied as the communities. Isolation, along with illegally manufactured substances, has only made matters worse.

**SOT Cheryl Crowe, Vice President Behavioral Health - OSF HealthCare**(Fentanyl has that analgesic quality that a lot of these individuals take. It's too much, they stop breathing and no one's around so we're seeing those deaths attributed to that. Some of our more rural regions we’re seeing that it's not only opioids. It's methamphetamine. It's cocaine. All of those substances are on the rise in those communities. :21)

**SOT Jerry Storm, Senior Vice President Pharmacy Services – OSF HealthCare**(It's kind of a hidden monster that's back there and once we get beyond the pandemic this is going to be another large - you can call it epidemic because it's not worldwide. But I've got concerns regarding fentanyl crossing the borders and we continue to see it escalating. :22)

While it may be slow, there has been progress made to address the situation. Treatment facilities that were closed due to COVID-19 restrictions are reopening, OSF is looking at telehealth strategies and potential partnerships for those in need of support, and proper narcotic dosing education with providers continues.

Jerry Storm would like to see the Biden administration remove bureaucratic hurdles that prevent doctors from prescribing drugs to help patients with opioid use disorder avoid relapsing.

**SOT Jerry Storm, Senior Vice President Pharmacy Services – OSF HealthCare**(Medication assistance programs have been proven over and over again they're successful and there are a lot of individuals that are successful today, have a full-time job, but that medication assistance program got them there. :15)

For Cheryl Crowe, it’s a matter of letting people know there are a variety of resources available to help, including those dealing with chronic pain.

**SOT Cheryl Crowe, Vice President Behavioral Health - OSF HealthCare**(We don't want to leave them in a state of pain or struggle, but we have to use the appropriate drugs in the appropriate dose, the appropriate amount for individuals. We're getting much better at that. So, yes, we provide them with some resources to reach out to if they're struggling. :16)

If you or someone you know is struggling with a substance abuse disorder, reaching out to a [Behavioral Health Navigator](https://www.osfhealthcare.org/mental-health/services/navigators/) can get you connected to those who can help.