

President Barak Obama Holds Public Forum in Charleston, WV

By Patrice Pooler, MA, ADC, WVAADC President

West Virginia has the highest drug overdose mortality rate in the United States. According to a 2013 report, the number of drug overdose deaths in my state, a majority of which are from prescription drugs, has increased by 605 percent since 1999.¹

On October 21, 2015, these staggering statistics brought President Barack Obama to Charleston, WV to host a community forum at The Roosevelt Neighborhood Center to announce public and private sector efforts to address prescription drug abuse and heroin use. As the President of the West Virginia Association of Alcoholism and Drug Counselors (WVAADC), I was invited to the forum.

President Obama's wish to discuss with local, State, and Federal leaders how to handle the growing prescription drug abuse and heroin use epidemic in West Virginia and across the United States brought a table of experts to the forum, including Sylvia Burwell, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Michael Botticelli, Director of National Drug Control Policy, Carrie Dixon, a parent, Dr. Michael Brumage, Executive Director of the Kanawha Charleston Health Department, and Brent Webster, City of Charleston Chief of Police.

President Obama addressed the audience with a spirited demeanor: "Well Hello, West Virginia... Go Mountaineers!" He discussed how prescription drug abuse and heroin use are not "top-down solution" type of problems; they require everyone to work together and understand what families, law enforcement, and our health systems are going through in order to find solutions.

He remembered exploring this issue when he began his terms of office and being stunned by the statistics: that more Americans now die every year from drug overdoses than they do from motor vehicle crashes and that the majority of those overdoses involve legal prescription drugs. That in 2013 alone, overdoses from prescription drugs killed more than 16,000 Americans. He stated that he knows that behind these numbers is incredible pain for families and that West Virginians understand these facts better than anyone.

He pointed out that the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported 259,000,000 prescriptions were given in 2012, which is enough to give every American adult their own prescription bottle of medicine. As the use has increased so has the misuse, with a rise in heroin use and 4 out of 5 heroin users starting out by using prescription drugs. He acknowledged that this addiction is taking lives, destroying families, and shattering communities across our Nation.



President Obama asserted that substance use disorders do not discriminate and stigma prevents people from getting the help they need, causing families to suffer in silence. He suggested that we replace those stereotypes of "junkie" with words such as "father," "daughter," "son," "friend," and "sister," and begin to understand that substance abuse can happen to any of us. He believes we cannot fight this epidemic without reducing stigma.

President Obama pointed out that he has made substance use disorders a priority within his administration. In 2010, he released the first National Drug Control Policy, followed by the Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Plan in 2011. Implementation of those plans supported and expanded community-based efforts to prevent drug use reduce deaths, and help people receive treatment. In addition, under the Af-

fordable Care Act, 17 million people have healthcare who could not previously afford it, health care costs have been reduced, and more insurance plans have to cover substance use disorders.

The budget President Obama has sent to Congress includes \$133 million dollars for enhanced treatment and prevention programs to invest in state overdose prevention programs, prepare more first responders to save more lives, and expand the number of medication-assisted treatment centers. Rather than spending billions of taxpayer dollars on long-term prison sentences for non-violent drug offenders, President Obama pointed out that we could reduce costs and increase outcomes by getting treatment to those that need it. Those savings could then be used to ensure law enforcement has the resources to go after individuals who are bringing hard drugs into our country.

At the forum, President Obama announced that on that day he had issued a Memorandum to Federal Departments and Agencies directing two important steps to combat prescription drug abuse and heroin epidemic:

- **Prescriber Training:** Requiring Federal Departments and Agencies to provide training in opioid prescribing to Federal health professionals who prescribe opioids to establish the Federal Government as a model for other health care professionals; and
- **Improving Access to Treatment:** Requiring Federal Departments and Agencies to "directly provide, contract to provide, reimburse for, or otherwise facilitate access to health benefits, to conduct a review to identify barriers to medication-assisted treatment for opioid use disorders, and develop action plans to address these barriers."²

President Obama stressed that evidence shows that medication-assisted treatment, if done properly in combination with behavioral therapy and other support/counseling/12-step programs, can work and be an effective strategy to support recovery. He continued that this approach cannot be just replacing one drug with another; it has to be a part of a total package, with plans to explore any existing barriers to medication-assisted treatment that are preventing the creation of more of these treatment facilities.

President Obama also announced an increase of private sector involvement, with commitments from over 40 provider groups, including the American Medical Association, American Nurses Association, and the American Dental Association, to concrete actions over the next two years, such as expanding prescriber training, increasing the use of naloxone, certifying more physicians to provide medication-assisted treatment for opioid use disorder, increasing the number of health care providers registered with their State Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs, and reaching more than 4 million health care providers with awareness messaging on opioid abuse, appropriate prescribing practices, and other important provider actions. In addition, major broadcasters, companies, and national sports associations will donate more than 20 million dollars of airtime and advertising space for public service announcements about the risks of prescription drug misuse.

To further expound on these efforts, President Obama turned the forum over to the esteemed panel on stage, asking the panelists to share what their agencies or groups are doing to help solve the prescription drug and heroin problem at the Federal, State, and local level:

- Secretary Burwell stated that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is focused on evidence-based strategies, changing prescribing practices, working on medication-assisted treatment, and expanding naloxone usage and accessibility. Among other actions, HHS recently launched HHS.gov/opioids as a one-stop federal resource with tools and information for families, health care providers, law enforcement, and others on prescription drug abuse and heroin use prevention, treatment, and response.
- Dr. Brumage, Executive Director of the Kanawha Charleston Health Department, stated that West Virginia has the highest rate of Hepatitis B and 2nd highest rate of Hepatitis C in the nation, largely due to needle sharing amongst addicts. He reported that Charleston, WV has begun to move towards a harm reduction program with a syringe exchange, testing for Hepatitis B and C, and HIV, and offering contraceptives to and treating people who walk through their clinic doors with dignity and respect. He stated that West Virginia University researchers are exploring mindfulness-based relapse prevention with people in recovery from opioid use disorders, based on pioneering work done at the University of Washington. He also reported that West Virginia Delegate Dr. Chris Stansbury from Kanawha County has plans on sponsoring legislation to make naloxone an over-the-counter medication.
- Chief Webster of the City of Charleston Police Department stated that the Department was implementing a number of strategies, including training all officers on the use of naloxone, and working with the U.S. Attorney's Office and Project LEAD, the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion Program. He stated that since

2014, of the 39 people considered low-level users who were arrested and offered the option of treatment instead of jail, only one person has been re-arrested. Chief Webster also discussed the success of the "Handle With Care" pilot program in Charleston, WV set up for children who have had a parent arrested, etc., in which the day after the arrest, the arresting officer contacts the children's school principal or school counselor to ask that the children be "handled with care" that day (perhaps get an extra day for assignments, etc.).

Finally, the Charleston Gazette had a community member share the story of his daughter's overdose and ask President Obama about solutions to the issue of access to treatment, especially in places of great need like West Virginia where there are not enough treatment providers or facilities.

The President addressed these concerns by first mentioning his favorite quote on children: "Having children is like having your heart walking outside of your body. All you care about is making sure they are okay." He acknowledged that the opioid epidemic and the pain it is causing families and great parents who love their kids is happening across the country — that is an American problem. He stated that we need to build, fund, and support more treatment centers locally, as having insurance coverage isn't enough if there isn't a treatment center to send your family member to when they need one. He also stated that consumer groups, medical associations, and others need to voice to insurance companies that coverage for treatment is vital as everyone's children are at risk. Addressing the vulnerability of children, President Obama pointed out that research shows that kids are a sponge for knowledge, even under three years old, and that we need to invest more in early childhood education, prenatal education for parents, home visitations with at-risk moms - initiatives that need to be focused on at the state and local level.

President Obama closed his inspiring and engaging discussion by stating: "We need to remember 'there, but for the grace of God, go I,' and when we do, we have the chance to do something."

It was an honor and privilege to represent WVAADC, the West Virginia affiliate of NAADAC at such a compelling and history-making event — sitting second row, center — in front of our 44th President, Barrack Obama, listening to his compelling and thoughtful perspectives. I even got to shake his hand and get a hug from our Commander in Chief! What an incredible experience!



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REFERENCES

- ¹ Trust for America's Health (2013). *Prescription Drug Abuse: Strategies to Stop the Epidemic*. Available at <https://healthyamericans.org/reports/drugabuse2013/>
- ² White House Office of the Press Secretary (2015). *FACT SHEET: Obama Administration Announces Public and Private Sector Efforts to Address Prescription Drug Abuse and Heroin Use*. (October 21, 2015). Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/21/fact-sheet-obama-administration-announces-public-and-private-sector>