

HIV, Hepatitis Outbreaks Hit West Virginia As Opioid Funds Lag

By Shira Stein

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- Opioid funding takes at least three months to get from state to county level
- West Virginia is dealing with possibly linked Hepatitis A and HIV outbreaks

West Virginia communities, still waiting on federal funds to combat the opioid crisis, are experiencing a surge in HIV and hepatitis A, and at least one public health official sees a connection.

Since March 2018, West Virginia has seen over 2,500 cases of hepatitis A, a contagious liver disease that can be spread through contaminated food or drink. The state typically sees fewer than 15 cases per year. The Mountain State averages 74 new cases of HIV a year, but Huntington, W.Va., has seen 53 new cases alone so far in 2019.

Angie Gray, nurse director of the Berkeley-Morgan County, W.Va., Health Department, told Bloomberg Law the outbreaks are being fueled by a months-long bottleneck at the state level that is delaying counties' access to desperately needed funds. That money could be used to increase access to medication assisted treatment, provide funding for operational costs of a syringe exchange program, and fund other prevention and treatment activities.

The frustration over the funding delays and alarm over the infectious disease outbreaks come as Congress is getting ready to appropriate about \$8 billion for the opioid crisis. But that money will take months to even get to the states, let alone the counties dealing with the addiction epidemic. In addition, federal officials are working to implement President Donald Trump's plan to end the HIV epidemic by 2030. The initiative aims to reduce new instances of HIV by 90% in the next decade.

HIV and hepatitis can be spread through needle sharing. People typically think of hepatitis B and C as being spread through needles, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has shown the current hepatitis A outbreak started through needle sharing and then spread through people who used drugs and worked in restaurants.

West Virginia could also face other infectious consequences related to drug use, like infective endocarditis, an infection of the heart valves that can be caused by using unsanitary needles to inject drugs, Heather Bradley, a professor in the Georgia State University Department of Population Health, said.

A Long Lag

The West Virginia communities are waiting on funds from state opioid response grants, one of two types of federal grants aimed at combating the opioid epidemic.

Congress appropriated \$1.5 billion for these state opioid response grants in September 2018, and the Department of Health and Human Services announced the grantees the same month.

West Virginia received \$42.6 million from the state opioid response grants for fiscal year 2019, according to Allison Adler, communications director for the state's Department of Health and Human Resources. The project that Gray is working on with West Virginia University was granted \$50,000 of the \$2 million they requested, but they have yet to receive it. The grant will be used on a pilot program to expand access to prevention and early intervention, treatment, overdose reversal, family support, and recovery.

It can take three months or more for opioid grant funds to move from the state to the county level in West Virginia, Gray said. She said she is aware of counties in Maryland that have already received their money.

West Virginia has such a long lag between receiving money from the federal government and counties being able to use the money because county administrators won't let officials spend the money until the grant has been signed by the state financial desk out of a concern the money could be called back, Gray said.

The West Virginia DHHR "works hard to issue all grant agreements in a timely manner while adhering to federal policies and guidelines governing each funding stream. Delays can occur, but every effort is made to work with grantees to resolve problems in a timely manner," Adler said in a statement to Bloomberg Law.

"To connect the two issues is not accurate. A delay in funding is not causing these outbreaks," Adler added.

Vulnerability to Outbreaks

A recent CDC study found every county in West Virginia is highly vulnerable to hepatitis or HIV outbreaks, and that 28 of the 55 counties are among the 220 most vulnerable in the U.S.

It's difficult to know how many people are at risk because it's hard to distinguish if the outbreaks are tied to less safe injection practices or if the number of people injecting drugs is increasing, Bradley said.

Anthony S. Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, part of the National Institutes of Health, expressed his concern about this issue to Bloomberg Law in April.

These outbreaks are a long-term problem that aren't necessarily being caused by a lack of funding, Judith Feinberg, a professor with the West Virginia University School of Medicine and chair-elect of the HIV Medicine Association, said.

Syringe Exchanges

Gray said syringe exchange programs have helped, but there are barriers to running them in West Virginia. Federal funding can be used to pay for operating costs and staff of syringe exchange programs, but can't be used to purchase syringes.

A 2014 review of 12 studies showed that syringe-exchange programs are associated with reductions in HIV transmission.

The current outbreak of HIV in Cabell County is because of attitudes toward harm reduction methods, like syringe exchange, Bradley, a former epidemiologist with the CDC who led an investigation into HIV infections in the state in 2017, said.

Public health officials need support to explain why syringe access is so important, Gray said. "It's hard because some people have the attitude, just let them die," she said.

To contact the reporter on this story: Shira Stein in Washington at sstein@bloomberglaw.com

To contact the editors responsible for this story: Fawn Johnson at fjohnson@bloomberglaw.com; Brent Bierman at bbierman@bloomberglaw.com

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