

TACKLING THE OPIOID CRISIS IN WEST VIRGINIA

As a global healthcare company, Merck has an important responsibility to increase access to medicines and vaccines, and a commitment to help reduce the burden of disease around the world.¹ As a part of that commitment, the **Merck Foundation** is supporting an initiative with **Marshall Health** through a \$2 million grant over four years (2018-2021) to establish the *Great Rivers Regional System for Addiction Care* (the System), a comprehensive program to address the opioid epidemic in West Virginia (WV).²

This initiative aligns with the **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of Good Health and Well-Being** – one of 17 SDGs unanimously adopted in 2015 by all the member states of the United Nations. The SDGs represent the greatest global effort to improve the lives of the world's population.¹

NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO THE OPIOID CRISIS IN THE UNITED STATES

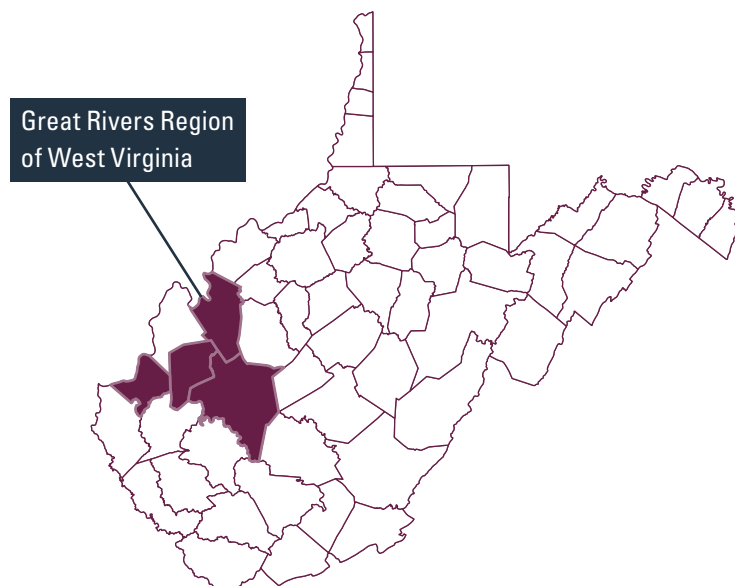
In the United States, opioid overdose is the leading cause of death for Americans under 50.³ The increase in the number of Americans abusing opioids may also lead to a rise in the number of people contracting other infectious diseases such as HIV and hepatitis C.⁴

West Virginia has the highest overdose death rate in the United States,⁵ with opioids responsible for most overdose deaths in the state.⁶ West Virginia also ranks first nationally for rates of hepatitis B and second for rates of hepatitis C.⁷

Nearly half of West Virginians live in rural, geographically isolated areas with limited transportation services and access to health care.⁸ They often experience high poverty, tend to be in poor health, contend with complicating risk factors (e.g., trauma, chronic diseases), and struggle to overcome issues of substance misuse, mental health disorders, and high rates of unemployment.⁸ Specifically, the Great Rivers Region of WV, which consists of Cabell, Jackson, Kanawha and Putnam counties, has the highest number of opioid-related deaths in the state.² This region needs additional support and new approaches to help combat this epidemic.

GREAT RIVERS REGIONAL SYSTEM FOR ADDICTION CARE PROVIDES A SOLUTION

The System is an innovative approach to address the opioid public health crisis that is affecting the Great Rivers Region of West Virginia. It will serve as a hub that coordinates the efforts of all program partners to help reduce opioid addiction, improve access to substance abuse prevention and treatment services, and help reduce the rising rates of HIV and hepatitis C infections.²



PROGRAM GOALS

- Reduce opioid overdoses and overdose deaths;
- Increase access to and retention in substance abuse treatment;
- Enhance access to care for viral hepatitis and HIV; and
- Improve public health education to increase awareness and prevention of substance abuse and addiction.

SYSTEM COMPONENTS

The System includes comprehensive **public health harm-reduction programs** such as:

- Risk Reduction Services that offer access to other needed health services.
- Prevention Education to support personal health and well-being.
- Counseling and Referral Services to link participants to needed addiction counseling and substance abuse treatment, as well as health care and other community-based services.

Other elements of the System include:

- **Quick Response Teams**, which are integrated, community teams that include a medical care provider (e.g., emergency medical services), law enforcement officer, and a treatment and recovery provider to visit individuals following an overdose episode.
- **Project Engage**, which is an initiative where hospitals will implement clinical pathways in the emergency departments, inpatient settings, and mother-baby units to screen and identify individuals with substance use disorders and connect them to treatment and recovery services.
- **Provider Response Organization for Addiction Care & Treatment (PROACT)**, where centers will serve as central hubs (or single-accessible service hubs) to connect individuals with addiction to recovery resources and treatment services as well as primary care, social services, and other community resources.
- **Community Engagement and Education** to raise awareness and prevention of substance abuse and addiction and encourage adoption of healthy behaviors.

ADVANCING BEST PRACTICES TO COMBAT THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Over the next four years, the Great Rivers Region will pursue full implementation and coordination of each of the components of the System. This comprehensive program will implement activities 'in' and 'with' local communities, harnessing the expertise of multiple partners including health care providers, public health experts, first responders and community-based organizations.

Marshall Health and its program partners will engage an independent evaluator to conduct a robust process and outcomes evaluation of the program. The coalition of partners aim to create and disseminate an effective regional community-based model that can strengthen local health care and public health systems in responding to the opioid crisis.²

The partners hope that this comprehensive, integrated program can be a model for others working to tackle the challenges of the opioid epidemic and the spread of infectious diseases associated with the epidemic.

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