5 principles to wisely spend opioid litigation settlement funds

FEB 10, 2021

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The AMA has joined a coalition of more than 30 medical, academic, public health and advocacy organizations in support of principles to help guide state and local spending of potential opioid litigation settlement funds.

The coalition, coordinated by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, is urging state and local officials to avoid the mistakes of the 1998 tobacco settlement and use the expected funds from the litigation to support evidence-based efforts that save lives. The American College of Emergency Physicians, American Society of Addiction Medicine, American Public Health Association, and the National Harm Reduction Coalition are among the other organizations backing the principles.

Deaths due to drug overdoses have significantly risen since the COVID-19 pandemic began, with some states reporting jumps of 30%.

“We are still deep in the midst of an overdose crisis,” said Joshua Sharfstein, MD, vice dean for public health practice and community Engagement at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. “We don’t want to see a repeat of what happened with the tobacco litigation settlements where the vast majority of the funds weren’t used to address the actual public health issue at hand.”

Read more in this JAMA Psychiatry article, “The Hidden Epidemic of Opioid Overdoses During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic.”

The report, “Principles for the Use of Funds From the Opioid Litigation,” lays out five principles that states and localities getting opioid litigation settlement funds should follow.

**Spend money to save lives**

Given the economic downturn, the temptation will be to use the dollars to fill budgetary holes rather than expand needed programs. The funds should add to—rather than replace—existing spending.
Use evidence to guide spending

At this point in the overdose epidemic, researchers and clinicians have built a substantial body of evidence demonstrating what works and what does not. That information should be used to make funding decisions.

Invest in youth prevention

Children, youth and families should be supported with long-term investments in effective programs and strategies for community change.

Focus on racial equity

Significant funds should be directed to communities affected by years of discriminatory policies, and that are now experiencing substantial increases in overdoses.

Develop a fair, transparent process on where to spend funding

This process should be guided by public health leaders with the active engagement of people and families with drug-overdose experiences, clinicians, as well as other key groups.

Separately, a recent report developed by the AMA and Manatt Health details other steps that state policymakers should take on the overdose epidemic.

The report says they should prioritize removing barriers to evidence-based treatment such as cost, time-wasting prior-authorization requirements for medications proven to effectively treat substance-use disorders, and vastly insufficient insurance coverage for nonopioid treatments for pain management.

Check out this ReachMD interview with Dr. Harris, in which she outlines this national road map. Discover what else the AMA is doing to help end the overdose epidemic.