

Prevention: Oregon's U.S. congressional delegation wants opioid efforts to go nationwide

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U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra on Friday visited the Portland region, which has become a poster child for fentanyl and drug addiction in America.

He met with Oregon officials, who would like lessons learned in the state replicated on a national scale.

Among their stops, they visited Tumwater Middle School in Beaverton School District and talked about preventing youth drug abuse and addiction in a roundtable with educators, students, advocates and behavioral and addiction specialists.

Oregon is in the midst of an addiction crisis. The ease of obtaining opioids and other drugs with the decriminalization of low-level drug possession through Measure 110 have created a public health tsunami of overdose deaths and a lack of resources to treat people with addictions.

Oregon officials and Becerra said prevention is key to driving down the overdoses and drug usage.

U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici plans to introduce a congressional bill in September that would provide funding for school districts nationwide to have curriculum modeled after what's in place at the Beaverton School District, which was the first in Oregon to launch a fentanyl awareness curriculum after an a.

"This really is about saving lives," said Bonamici, a Democratic congresswoman who represents Oregon's First Congressional District.

The Beaverton program was created through Jon and Jennifer Epstein's advocacy after they lost their son Cal to fentanyl poisoning in 2020 when he mistakenly took a fake blue pill while on a break home from college. Their son believed it was oxycontin, but it was fentanyl, which is more than 100 times more powerful than morphine.

They channeled their grief into advocacy and asked Beaverton School District, where their son had attended schools, to use his story to educate youth. As a result, the Beaverton School District became one of the first in the country to mandate yearly fentanyl lessons for all middle and high school students.

"These youth deaths are the most preventable deaths," Jon Epstein said during the discussion. "Solutions like this bill being proposed present a greater opportunity for consensus."

Jennifer Epstein said they found their son unresponsive in his bed when he was home from college in Hawaii. She found a small bag of blue pills.

Cal was looking for oxycontin and instead received fake pills.

"We had to say our goodbyes," she said. "Our amazing, beautiful 18-year- old son was gone."

Epstein said Cal made a poor choice in looking for oxycontin pills and struggled with anxiety issues. But, she said, they believe if he had known about the lethal danger of fentanyl and how it can be disguised to look like pills, he would have made a different choice.

The district has not had any fentanyl-related deaths since, but Portland schools have. Two McDaniel High School students died in 2022, and earlier this year a teen at Franklin High died from a suspected fentanyl overdose.

This session, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 238, which requires the Oregon Health Authority, Board of Education and Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission to develop education materials to teach schoolchildren about the dangers of opioids, as well state laws that protect people who report overdoses or seek treatment.

Students take part

The roundtable, which included health, medical and school professionals, also heard from students. Alexa Merriwether, a 16-year-old senior at Beaverton School District's Sunset High School, said the lessons learned from the curriculum help students to be mindful of their choices.

"It does help me make sure I'm aware of my actions," Merriwether said. "It's so easy for students to access drugs these days."

Oregon faces an opioid crisis, with 280 fatalities in 2019, 472 in 2020 and 745 in 2021, according to the Oregon Health Authority. Many of the deaths are attributed to fentanyl, which is so potent that the equivalent of two grains of sand can kill. It is often laced in illicit pills made to resemble prescription oxycodone or tranquilizers such as Xanax.

Tackling the issue requires a change in mindset, Becerra said. For example, federal dollars can be used for fentanyl test strips, which test drugs, including street drugs, for fentanyl, he said. That approach could help addicts avoid overdoses.

“We want to go where the evidence takes us,” he said.

Bonamici said she’s drafting the bill and doesn’t know how much funding would go towards the project.

Becerra praised the idea and said it’s needed along with other efforts.

“I hope she asks for lots of money,” he said. “It won’t come a minute too quickly.”

U.S. Rep. Andrea Salinas, a Democratic member who represents the state’s Sixth Congressional District, and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, another Democrat, also met with Becerra.

Salinas said many people purchasing the pills don’t realize what they’re buying and believe they are getting medications for a mental health challenge.

“Instead of getting the help they need, they’re getting a deadly pill,” Salinas said. “It’s going to take an all-hands-on-deck approach.”

Merkley said prevention is key, along with stopping drugs from entering U.S. borders and increasing the distribution of naloxone, which reverses opioid overdoses.

“Pills are going to exist,” he said. “Kids are going to think about trying them. Education is a significant factor in taking on this challenge.”

The roundtable was part of Becerra’s three-stop day in the Portland area on Friday. The first was at Tigard High School, where Becerra participated in a roundtable to talk about Oregon’s challenges in developing the behavioral health workforce, which faces struggles to recruit and retain enough professionals to meet the demands for service.

And at a Rite Aid Pharmacy in Tigard, Becerra touted President Joe Biden’s lower cost prescription drug law, called the Inflation Reduction Act. It caps a month’s supply of Medicare-covered insulin at \$35 and makes recommended and preventative vaccines available for free for people with Medicare prescription drug coverage.

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