

ED GAINNEY  
MAYOR



LAURA DROGOWSKI  
MANAGER

CITY OF PITTSBURGH  
**OFFICE OF COMMUNITY HEALTH & SAFETY**  
CITY- COUNTY BUILDING

January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Office of Community Health & Safety  
414 Grant Street, Suite 409  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

The Honorable Robert Kauffman  
312 Main Capitol Building  
P.O. Box 202089  
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2089

The Honorable Timothy Briggs  
302 Main Capitol Building  
P.O. Box 202149  
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2149

Dear Chair Kauffman and Democratic Chair Briggs,

Opioid overdose is a leading cause of accidental death in the United States and has caused significant morbidity and mortality in the City of Pittsburgh. Western Pennsylvania faces a reemergence of the opioid overdose crisis, with regional rates of overdose deaths accelerating faster than national averages. From 2018 to 2019 Allegheny County saw a 16% increase in overdose deaths, outpacing the 5% increase across the United States in the same year. The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to heighten opioid overdose risk by exacerbating mental health conditions and economic stressors which are common risk factors influencing unsafe opioid use disorder and has stripped people of health insurance coverage, recovery supports, and in-person treatment.<sup>i</sup>

There is an additional element of racial inequity embedded in the data, revealing a significantly higher mortality rate for Black residents than white residents (Figure 1). While the rate of overdose in the white population has decreased in recent years, the rate of overdose has increased dramatically in the Black population, showing that Black residents account for a disproportionate number of overdose deaths. This disparity is even more pronounced when separated by gender, showing that Black men experienced a 200% increase in overdose deaths from Quarter 3 of 2019-Quarter 2 of 2020 compared with data from Quarter 3 of 2018-Quarter 2 of 2019. (Figure 2).<sup>ii</sup>

Alongside the increase in opioid overdoses and opioid overdose deaths, fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid that can quickly cause respiratory depression, was present in 77% of

Allegheny County overdose deaths in 2020 and is increasingly present in the drug supply.<sup>iii</sup> Fentanyl can be mixed with many substances and is especially dangerous when fentanyl is mixed with non-opioid substances such as cocaine, where the individual using drugs may not realize that fentanyl is present as an additive.

Fentanyl test strips identify the presence of fentanyl in substances and allow people who use drugs to reduce their risk of overdose. A study published in the International Journal of Drug Policy found that people were likely to change their drug use behavior if they used fentanyl test strips and the study concluded that fentanyl test strips “represent an effective addition to current overdose prevention efforts.”<sup>iv</sup> Unfortunately, current policy restricts the ability of healthcare providers, outreach organizations, community members, social service providers, public health agencies, and local governments to legally distribute this lifesaving tool. Despite current policy, Prevention Point Pittsburgh has safely distributed fentanyl test strips to their program participants for over a decade, who rely on their services to stay alive in the face of an increasingly potent and unpredictable drug supply.

In August 2021, the City of Pittsburgh decriminalized the use, possession, and distribution of fentanyl test strips through Executive Order. Prior to this Executive Order, the Pennsylvania Attorney General and Allegheny County District Attorney both declined to prosecute for simple possession of fentanyl test strips. This followed widespread recognition among healthcare providers, outreach workers, public health officials, emergency medical services, and the law enforcement community that fentanyl test strips were a necessary public health and safety tool in the face of increasing opioid overdose deaths involving fentanyl. The City of Pittsburgh has worked with harm reduction organizations, outreach workers, and community members to educate Pittsburgh residents on the utility of fentanyl test strips and is now working on targeted distribution of fentanyl test strips to affected residents.

The City of Pittsburgh supports statewide legalization of fentanyl test strips and urges members of the Judiciary Committee to advance HB 1393. Fentanyl test strips are a commonsense harm reduction tool that will keep Pennsylvanians alive with the hope of one day entering recovery.

Sincerely,



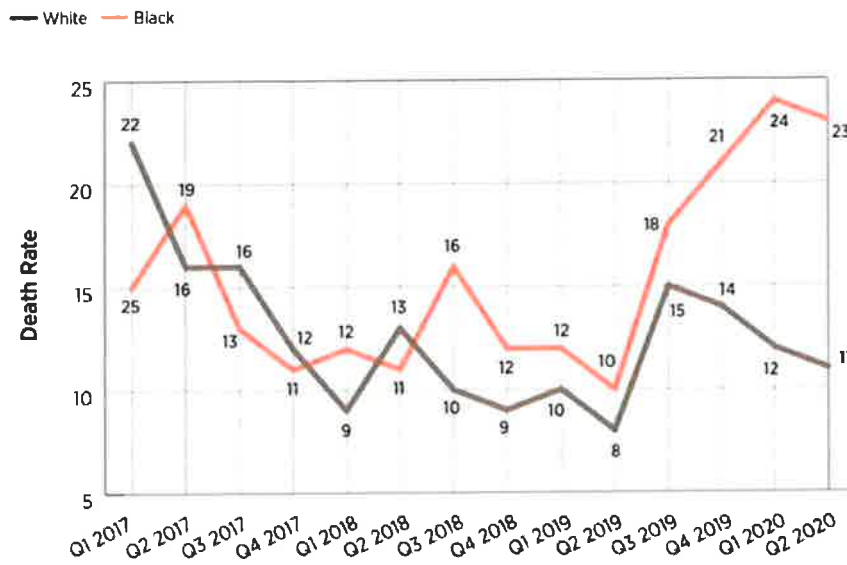
Laura Drogowski  
Manager



Joshua Schneider  
Overdose Prevention Coordinator

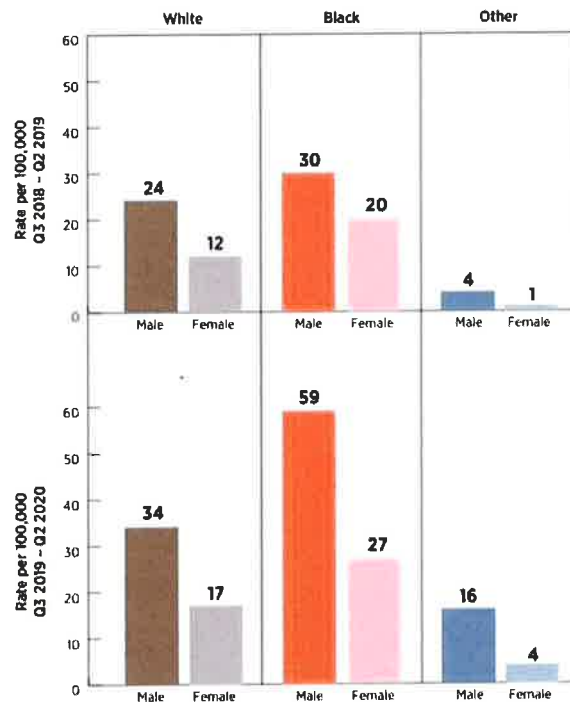
**Figure 1**

Allegheny County Quarterly Death Rate per 100,000 by Race, Q1 017 through Q2 2020



**Figure 2**

Allegheny County Death Rate per 100,000 by Race and Legal Sex, Q3 2018 through Q2 2020



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<sup>i</sup> Webster, Lynn R. MD Risk Factors for Opioid-Use Disorder and Overdose, *Anesthesia & Analgesia*: November 2017 - Volume 125 - Issue 5 - p 1741-1748 doi: 10.1213/ANE.0000000000002496

<sup>ii</sup> Accidental Overdose Deaths in Allegheny County, January 2016 – June 2020. Allegheny County Health Department, Apr. 2021, [www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/wpcontent/uploads/2021/05/21-ACDHS-05-AccidentalOverdoses-04-09-2021\\_final-1.pdf](http://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/wpcontent/uploads/2021/05/21-ACDHS-05-AccidentalOverdoses-04-09-2021_final-1.pdf).

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Peiper, Nicholas C et al. "Fentanyl test strips as an opioid overdose prevention strategy: Findings from a syringe services program in the Southeastern United States." *The International Journal on Drug Policy* vol. 63 (2019): 122-128. doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.08.007