

# FENTANYL: OUR YOUTH IN CRISIS



**Rainbow Fentanyl On Display**

*Source: Copyright free image from Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA)*

## **SUMMARY**

The Monterey County Civil Grand Jury (CGJ) launched an investigation into the fentanyl crisis in the County. The investigation examined the extent to which Monterey County public schools and other partners provide fentanyl awareness and prevention education in the community.

The fentanyl epidemic is a public health crisis. According to a Rand Survey released in February 2024, more than 40% of Americans know someone who died from a drug overdose. In 2022, drug overdoses were the primary cause of death for both men and women ages 25-54 in California. Among young adults ages 15-24, it was the second leading cause of death. An effective approach to this crisis is an expansion of community awareness, especially for our vulnerable youth, according to experts in the field.

The CGJ's investigation yielded areas of concern. Funding disparities across school districts limit:

- expanding opioid awareness beyond the California Education Codes
- financing the valuable services offered by drug education agencies
- providing safe spaces on campus benefiting youth mental health
- training staff to administer Narcan (or Naloxone), the medical antidote for fentanyl
- implementing peer-to-peer and youth leadership programs as tools for broadening student awareness, elevating the youth voice, and improving mental health outcomes

Although Monterey County received more than \$2M of opioid settlement funds in 2022 and 2023, it has yet to approve the final plan for the allocation of the funds. This funding delay compromises equitable County-wide responsiveness to the fentanyl crisis and puts lives at risk. The CGJ recommends immediate action by the Monterey County Health Department (MCHD) to bring its final plan for equitably allocating the opioid settlement dollars designated for all Monterey County local governments before the Board of Supervisors (BOS) for its swift review and approval.

The CGJ further recommends all County middle and high schools prioritize full compliance with Senate Bill 10 (SB10), Melanie's Law, by updating safety plans with overdose protocols, improving Narcan availability, and accessibility to fentanyl resources. Lastly, the CGJ advocates for creation of more wellness centers and youth leadership programs to enhance both mental health and fentanyl awareness outcomes.

Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE) and Montage Health's Prescribe Safe (MHPS) have both created multi-agency coalitions implementing awareness and prevention initiatives across the County. The continued collaboration between MCOE and MHPS is vital to reducing the County's vulnerability to the danger of illicit fentanyl. Formalizing this partnership is recommended.

## BACKGROUND

According to the California Overdose Surveillance Dashboard, the opioid epidemic began in 2000 with the first wave of overdose deaths related to prescription opioid use, followed by a second wave due to heroin overdoses. Fentanyl is now driving the third, most deadly wave of the opioid epidemic.



**Lethal Dose of Fentanyl (2 milligrams)**

*Source: Copyright free image from Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA)*

Pharmaceutical fentanyl is prescribed by a doctor to treat severe pain, such as after surgery. The current opioid epidemic is caused by illegally-produced fentanyl sold on the streets. Illicit fentanyl is commonly mixed into other drugs like heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamines and is highly addictive. Cheap to produce, drug-makers cut fentanyl into most street

drugs. When laced into other drugs or counterfeit prescription pills, such as Xanax or Percocet, fentanyl is nearly impossible to detect. It is tasteless, odorless, and fatal in small quantities. People are often unaware they are taking drugs contaminated with lethal amounts of fentanyl, which increases the risk for accidental overdose or death. Counterfeit medications account for a dramatic increase in opioid-related overdose injuries and deaths, particularly among teens and young adults.

Naloxone, also called Narcan, is a nasal spray used to reverse opioid overdoses. It is safe to use, and has no side effects, even if someone is not experiencing an overdose. With the rise of fentanyl-related accidental overdoses that can happen anywhere, at any time, experts in the field are now recommending that everyone carry Naloxone to help save lives.

The latest data released March 1, 2024, on the California Overdose Surveillance Dashboard confirmed that overdose rates again increased in Monterey County for the 12-month period ending the second quarter of 2023, making 2023 a deadlier year than

2022. Youth are an especially vulnerable group, due to age-related drug experimentation, lack of awareness of fentanyl's deadliness and widespread availability, and access to social media sites such as Snapchat and Instagram for drug purchases. In 2019, Monterey, Pacific Grove, and Seaside all suffered the heartache of teen overdoses due to fentanyl-laced pills. These teen deaths are traumatizing for community members across the entire County.

The CGJ launched an investigation into the opioid epidemic to assess efforts to reduce youth overdoses through fentanyl mitigation efforts – awareness, education, and prevention – in Monterey County school districts. With an enrollment of 77,387 students, the Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE) provides oversight, guidance, and training to all public and charter schools. According to the MCOE website, the Monterey County vulnerable student population includes: 75% socioeconomically disadvantaged, 34% English learners, 10% students with disabilities, and 9% homeless youth, and 4% migrant students. Opioid settlement funds awarded to California for opioid remediation prioritize allocations for vulnerable youth.

The County's student demographics also impact funding that the school districts receive from the State of California. Several years ago, the State revised the funding methodology and introduced the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). Districts are now given more authority to design budgets based on the needs of their students.

#### Opioid Settlements Fund (OSF)

In 2018, Monterey County joined as a lead plaintiff in the federal lawsuit against 24 of the largest pharmaceutical manufacturers and distributors of prescription opioids. The case was settled in federal court in 2021. National Opioid Settlements Agreements of more than \$50B were finalized against 16 companies. The terms of the settlements specify that the funds are to be spent for opioid remediation efforts, such as prevention strategies and addiction treatment.

The California State Treasury created the Opioid Settlements Fund (OSF) where the federal judgments will be deposited. The State Department of Healthcare Services (DHCS) is the oversight agency for these funds. The Monterey County Health Department (MCHD) Director is the designated primary contact for Monterey County, setting the stage for the County and its 12 cities to receive current and future disbursements.

The County received disbursements in November 2022 from the “California Abatement Account Fund” allocated to all participating cities and counties that must be used for drug prevention, treatment, and education. In February 2023, Monterey County received funds earmarked solely for lead plaintiffs. These funds will be used for future opioid remediation efforts. Award periods last up to eighteen years and vary in terms of amounts.

In March 2023, the Monterey Health Department presented a comprehensive plan and strategies for allocating these funds. The BOS and the MCHD have yet to allocate \$2.7M in County opioid settlement funds received from the State.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The CGJ interviewed representatives familiar with operations of several Monterey County School districts as well as MCOE to understand school districts’ responsiveness to the opioid crisis. The CGJ also spoke with individuals from agencies working in partnership with these entities. The CGJ reviewed agency budgets, contractual agreements, and health/safety programs.

The CGJ consulted agency websites and conducted research on California Education Codes, legislation, opioid-related online resources, including the California Overdose Surveillance Dashboard, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Substance and Addiction Prevention Branch, and the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) concerning the OSF. Also reviewed were previous California Grand Jury reports regarding this topic.

The CGJ selected four school districts under the purview of MCOE: Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD), Pacific Grove Unified School District (PGUSD), Salinas Union High School District (SUHSD), and Soledad Unified School District (SUSD). MPUSD and PGUSD have both been impacted by fentanyl-related student overdoses. SUHSD is the largest district and SUSD is a smaller district. The CGJ also viewed student videos and watched fentanyl presentations and reviewed training materials.

## **DISCUSSION**

The CGJ initiated its investigation with a sense of urgency to understand how County agencies were responding to the ongoing fentanyl crisis.

### Montage Health Prescribe Safe Initiative (MHPSI)

Montage Health Foundation funds the Initiative which started in 2014 in response to the rise of overdose deaths from prescription opioids. Realizing the benefits of a collective approach to the epidemic, the Initiative brought together partners from throughout the County. Today, more than 35 agencies from health, law enforcement, schools, and business sectors participate in this multi-agency coalition, led by emergency medicine physicians with specializations in addiction. By 2018, prescription opioid overdose cases had declined in Monterey County.

However, overdose deaths in Monterey County increased dramatically between 2018 and 2021. Illegal fentanyl flooding the market was leading to the spike in overdoses and deaths.

The Initiative developed new goals to address the urgency of the fentanyl crisis:

- create and provide resources for youth and families
- educate the community and medical professional
- improve the safety of prescription drugs
- reduce inappropriate prescribing of pain medications and sedatives
- increase community access to addiction treatment

MHPS is a recognized leader in the County for its proactive partnerships, initiatives, and resource materials for schools. During the CGJ's investigation, fentanyl-related resources expanded.

#### The Drug Free Communities Grant

The goal of this multi-year grant, from the Montage Health Foundation, is to address youth substance abuse through community collaboration-building. The Initiative selected MPUSD as its partner. A student needs assessment was completed in May 2021. This information helped inform District plans. Additionally, Youth Leadership Councils have been created in all three MPUSD high schools. Youth Council students serve as mentors for middle school students. They also collaborate with the Initiative to share their youth perspective as future programming and materials are developed, to include an updated district-wide Drug and Alcohol Prevention Policy. A shift in school culture is the goal of the grant so that students can openly discuss mental health and substance use/abuse issues.

#### Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE)

While MCOE provides guidance and resources to County public school districts. Each district determines its own educational programming priorities based on local needs and student population. This yields a variance in funding levels across school districts and responsiveness to urgent educational challenges.

Valuable fentanyl prevention education is not available to all students in all County schools. Some schools can afford school-day fentanyl education by professionals to supplement instruction, and some schools cannot. At a minimum, students receive drug awareness education during their PE classes from a credentialed staff member, not a drug education professional. This pertains to the mandated health education classes, per California Education Code 51890; however, these classes focus more on alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and vaping, versus opioid/fentanyl awareness and prevention. Districts strapped for funds may have limited or no contracts with nonprofit partners to augment the standards-based approach within a district. In addition, MCOE does not receive any funding specifically for fentanyl/drug awareness prevention instruction.

## Monterey County Safe and Healthy Schools and Communities Coalition (MCSHSCC)

In 2022, MCOE launched the Monterey County Safe and Healthy Schools and Communities Coalition in response to the fentanyl crisis and other safety concerns. Like the Prescribe Safe Initiative, the Coalition is a multi-agency collaborative of school districts, charter schools, first responders, community-based organizations, county departments, and youth-focused entities. The Coalition's focus is to develop comprehensive resources and services to address school safety needs and challenges countywide, but more recently has prioritized fentanyl awareness and prevention.

The Coalition works with its community partners to standardize policies and protocols, improve communication and respond more effectively to student mental health and safety needs. During this academic year, MCOE and its coalition partners have hosted dozens of presentations for students, staff, and parents on fentanyl awareness topics.

### Naloxone Toolkit for Schools

In February 2024, the MCOE coalition and the Prescribe Safe Initiative jointly developed, vetted, and launched the Naloxone Toolkit for Schools. It offers an opioid and fentanyl fact sheet, training tools to administer Naloxone, tips for setting up a school or agency Naloxone program, and more resources. Links to access the Toolkit are available on both partner websites. The Initiative will also produce fentanyl training videos for school districts and parents using MCOE's Media Center for Art, Education and Technology studio.



**Naloxone/Narcan Nasal Spray**  
*Source: Stock image from Microsoft 365*

### Senate Bill 10 (SB10) – Melanie's Law

SB10, referred to as “Melanie's Law,” became law in California in October 2023. The bill is named for Melanie Ramos, a teenager who died from a fatal overdose of fentanyl in her school bathroom, unaware she had taken the drug.



SB10 mandates that schools serving grades 7-12 update their school safety plans to include specific protocols for preventing and/or responding to opioid overdose emergencies. This bill also requires the California Department of Education publish information on its website that addresses opioid awareness.

Melanie's Law also recommends that all County Offices of Education establish working groups on fentanyl education. Monterey County is already complying with the law's working group recommendation through its Coalition. Regarding other aspects of the law, some school districts are still minimally compliant. While the law sets a baseline, there is plenty of room to go beyond the minimum requirements.



*Source: Stock image from Microsoft 365*

### Wellness Centers

Educators, health care professionals, addiction specialists, and increasingly parents are realizing the need for youth mental health services. Addressing the critical mental health needs of our county's youth is valuable to incorporate into drug awareness and prevention efforts.

A designated wellness center is a valuable mental health asset. This is a space ideally located on campus for students seeking support from a mental health professional or simply a retreat space during the school day. A wellness center does not need to be in a separate building, but simply a safe, accessible space for students.

The Salinas Unified High School District (SUHSD) currently has designated Wellness Centers on eight of its ten campuses, with the remaining two in development. It is an important investment for the SUHSD, as the financial outlay has been substantial. Not all districts have the financial means to replicate wellness centers of this nature. For example, SUSD recently opened a Wellness space that is only open during lunchtime and breaks, until a social worker is hired. Yet, this space may have a similar level of impact as the more expensive sites on the SUHSD campuses. Any effort to transform and staff an existing space on campus to fill this purpose is an opportunity to improve student well-being.

### Youth Leadership / Peer-to-Peer Programs

Youth Leadership Councils have been created at all three MPUSD high schools and are engaging with collaborative partners to provide valuable input and suggestions from the



*Source: Stock image from Microsoft 365*

student perspective. Drug awareness and prevention presentations used at school assemblies were developed with and vetted by Youth Council members. Teens will listen more attentively and with a greater sense of connection to other teens in their peer group as opposed to adults. Similarly, peer-to-peer programs are great opportunities to build student

mentorship and leadership skills. Implementing programs of this nature can improve mental health outcomes for students. They are also vital drug awareness and prevention tools.

## **FINDINGS**

- F1. The Monterey County Safe and Healthy Schools and Communities Coalition and the Montage Health Prescribe Safe Initiative are leaders in the County's drug awareness and prevention efforts. A formal agreement between these two entities could enhance effectiveness and ensure partnership continuity.
- F2. The BOS has not approved allocations of County Opioid Settlement funds, while the MCHD finalizes a Comprehensive Strategy and Plan to allocate these funds, putting lives at risk.
- F3. The lack of the availability of a wellness space within County public schools, either a designated room or a separate building, staffed with at least one mental health professional, is a missed opportunity to address mental health needs.
- F4. Since the implementation of SB10 in January 2024, some school districts have not revised their safety plans to include overdose response protocols, risking the health and safety of students.
- F5. While peer-to-peer and youth student leadership programs supporting drug awareness and prevention education are successful tools for student engagement on this topic, some schools have not implemented these programs, putting students at risk.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- R1. MCOE and the MHPS formalize their partnership through a written agreement to ensure ongoing collaborative leadership by August 31, 2024.
- R2. The MCHD finalize its Comprehensive Strategy and Plan for allocating County Opioid Settlement funds for BOS approval by July 31, 2024.
- R3. The MCHD finalize agreements for services to begin equitable disbursements of County Opioid Settlement funds to partner agencies and school districts by October 31, 2024.
- R4. MCOE develop strategies with school districts for implementation of on-campus wellness spaces with appropriate staff to support students with their mental health and/or drug awareness by November 30, 2024.
- R5. MCOE require that all school districts comply with SB10, by updating school safety plans with overdose prevention, response protocols, and staff training by October 31, 2024.

- R6. MCOE ensure that all educational spaces in every district are equipped with Naloxone, known as Narcan, for use by trained staff in an opioid overdose emergency by August 31, 2024.
- R7. MCOE develop a training program and resources for district personnel to implement peer-to-peer and youth leadership programs by December 31, 2024.

## **REQUEST FOR RESPONSES**

The following responses are required pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05:

From the following governing bodies within 90 days:

- Monterey County Board of Supervisors
  - Finding: F2
  - Recommendations: R2 and R3

From the following elected official within 60 days:

- Monterey County Superintendent of Schools
  - Findings: F1 and F3-F5
  - Recommendations: R1 and R4-R7

## **INVITED RESPONSES**

From the following individual:

- Monterey County Health Department Director
  - Finding: F2
  - Recommendations: R2-R3

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.
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## **GLOSSARY & ACRONYMS**

BOS	Monterey County Board of Supervisors
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDPH	California Department of Public Health
DEA	Drug Enforcement Agency
DHCS	Department of Healthcare Services
LCFF	Local Control Funding Formula
MCHD	Monterey County Health Department
MCOE	Monterey County Office of Education
MCSHSCC	Monterey County Safe and Healthy Schools and Communities Coalition
MHPS	Montage Health Prescribe Safe
MHPSI	Montage Health Prescribe Safe Initiative
MPSUD	Monterey Peninsula Unified School District
OSF	Opioid Settlements Fund
PGUSD	Pacific Grove Unified School District
SUHSD	Salinas Union High School District
SUSD	Soledad Unified School District

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CA Department of Public Health (CDPH) - Substance and Addiction Branch: Fentanyl

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CCDPHP/sapb/Pages/Fentanyl.aspx>

CA Overdose Surveillance Dashboard - Monterey County Statistics

<https://skylab.cdph.ca.gov/ODdash/?tab=CTY>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - Fentanyl Facts

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