

# Grants aim for racial equity in opioid fight



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BOSTON (SHNS) – A total of \$1.5 million in grants will flow from Attorney General Maura Healey’s office to 16 organizations across the state that plan to use the money to fund recovery coaches, bilingual staff, outreach efforts and other measures aimed at expanding access for communities of color to opioid use treatment and recovery programs.

Healey announced the grants and discussed the initiatives during a virtual roundtable discussion Tuesday with some of the awardees, in which she said her office will aim to provide more such funding in the future. The grants were funded by a settlement Healey’s office last year reached with the Andover-based Injured Workers Pharmacy over its prescription drug dispensing practices.

“I really believe that we need to do what we can to incent investments, and however our office – whether it’s settlements with drug companies or others, we want to be there supporting and promoting your work,” she said.

According to the Department of Public Health’s latest report on opioid overdose deaths, from November 2020, the overdose death rate for all Massachusetts residents remained

nearly static from 2018 to 2019, but rose among Black non-Hispanic residents.

The rate across those two years decreased for white men and women, Asian Pacific Islander men, and Hispanic women, while it increased for Hispanic men and Black men and women.

**Grant recipients** include the Home Base program, which plans to develop training curriculum for staff to support Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) and veterans seeking opioid use disorder treatment; Victory Programs, which intends to launch recruitment and retention initiatives for bilingual staff and conduct training in cultural humility and racial equity; and Massachusetts General Hospital, which plans to tailor peer support offered through its Substance Use Disorder Bridge Clinic to women of color with opioid use disorder “who are also impacted by commercial sex exploitation.”

According to Healey’s office, the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program plans to use its award to fund a recovery support advocate “with lived experience in the communities the program serves,” who will work with Black and Latinx populations experiencing homelessness.

Dr. Jessie Gaeta, the chief medical officer of Boston Health Care for the Homeless, said social distancing efforts of the COVID-19 pandemic mean that many shelters have been “appropriately decongested,” with their residents moved into hotels, gymnasiums and other spaces.

“For people who are street homeless and really avoiding even those shelter systems, people have been even more isolated,” Gaeta said during the forum. “They’ve gone even further, sort of deeper into hidden society.”

That extra degree of isolation means that people are more often consuming drugs alone, she said, describing that as a “very risky practice.”

“We expect to see an increase in overdose deaths among homeless people in Boston during the pandemic, because of more social isolation,” Gaeta said.

Bridge Clinic psychologist Abigail Judge said women of color are “disproportionately vulnerable” to the intersection of substance use and commercial sexual exploitation and also the least likely to access treatment.

“Women have experiences of racism in health care that are decades long, experiences of victim-blaming, distrust from years of trauma, coupled with providers’ stigma not only about addiction but involvement in the sex trade, and there’s really cumulative stigma from both of those things,” Judge said. “And so thus this population tends to avoid care, actually, except for times of crisis.”

The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe will fund a full-time peer recovery specialist with its grant, to provide sober living assistance and services grounded in Wampanoag cultural teaching to tribal members.

“Because our contact history with colonialism includes land and resource deprivation, poverty and ongoing and persistent problems with racism, self-medication and addiction have been able to gain a foothold within our tribal nation,” Jessie Little Doe Baird, the tribe’s vice chairwoman, said in a statement. “Wampanoag need the Land, ceremony, resources, and each other to live in a healthy way. When these things are disrupted, cultural injury occurs. These wounds need the culture itself to help in healing.”