Merck Foundation and Marshall Health Announce New Initiative to Address Opioid Epidemic in West Virginia

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Merck Foundation Pledges $2 Million as First Private-Sector Partner

The Merck Foundation (the Foundation) is supporting a new initiative with Marshall Health to launch the Great Rivers Regional System for Addiction Care (the System) to address areas hit hardest by the opioid epidemic in West Virginia.

With a $2 million grant from the Foundation payable over four years, the System is an innovative, comprehensive approach that aims to reduce opioid overdoses and overdose deaths, improve access to substance abuse prevention and treatment services, and help reduce the rising rates of HIV and hepatitis C infections. Learn more about Merck’s commitment.

“Opioid overdose is the leading cause of death for Americans under 50, and opioid use contributes to a significant increase in infectious diseases, including HIV and hepatitis C,” said Dr. Julie L. Gerberding, chief patient officer, Merck and vice chair, Merck Foundation Board of Trustees. “We have a long history of addressing public health challenges and we’re proud to be the first private-sector partner to join with Marshall Health and others to find effective solutions to this deadly epidemic.”

West Virginia has the highest overdose rate in the United States – with opioids responsible for most overdose deaths – and it ranks first nationally for rates of hepatitis B and second for rates of hepatitis C. The Great Rivers Region, consisting of Cabell, Jackson, Kanawha and Putnam counties, has the highest number of opioid-related deaths in the state.

“The majority of the Great Rivers Region of West Virginia is rural and geographically isolated, making access to care and utilization of services a major issue related to health disparities in the region,” said Dr. Michael E. Kilkenny, physician director of the Cabell-Huntington Health Department. “In addition to the geographic and economic challenges, an alarming number of West Virginians struggle to overcome issues of substance misuse, mental health disorders and poverty. Programs like this are of critical importance to improving and maintaining public health.”

“We created the System as an innovative, comprehensive approach to address the opioid epidemic, especially among vulnerable populations in the Great Rivers Region,” said Robert Hansen, director of Addiction Services, Marshall Health. “We will implement activities in and with local communities, harnessing the expertise of multiple partners including health care providers, public health experts, first responders and community-based organizations. We are very appreciative of the commitment by the Merck Foundation as we begin to aggressively address this public health issue.”

Key components of the System will include:

- Comprehensive public health harm-reduction programs like risk reduction services, prevention education, and counseling and referral services
- Integrated, community quick response teams
- Hospital implementation of clinical pathways to treatment and recovery services
- Specialized treatment centers to serve as central hubs for connecting individuals with addiction to recovery resources and treatment services
- Opioid overdose reversal treatment education and distribution by local health departments
- Community engagement and education to raise awareness and prevention of substance use and addiction

Building a Sustainable, Scalable Model

“We believe this comprehensive, integrated program can be a model for others working to tackle the challenges of the opioid epidemic and the spread of infectious diseases,” said Lori Tremmel Freeman, chief executive officer, National Association of County and City Health Officials. “It is only through a coordinated approach working with local communities that we can begin to make headway against the multi-faceted issues the opioid crisis raises.”

Marshall Health and program partners will engage an independent evaluator to conduct a robust process and outcomes evaluation of the System. The coalition of partners aim to create and disseminate an effective regional community-based model that can strengthen local health care and public health systems in responding to the opioid crisis, and serve as a potential model for other states or regions. For more information on the System, please visit http://www.marshallhealth.org.

About Merck Foundation
The Merck Foundation is a U.S.-based, private charitable foundation. Established in 1957 by Merck, a leading global biopharmaceutical company, the Foundation is funded entirely by the company and is Merck’s chief source of funding support to qualified non-profit charitable organizations. Since its inception, the Merck Foundation has contributed more than $896 million to support important initiatives that address societal needs and are consistent with Merck’s overall mission of inventing for life by bringing forward medicines and vaccines for many of the world’s most challenging diseases. For more information, visit www.merckgiving.com.

About Marshall Health

Marshall Health is the faculty practice plan of the Marshall University Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, making it the region’s only academic health system. With more than 250 providers, 65 areas of primary and advanced care and 25 outpatient clinic locations, Marshall Health is also the largest, most comprehensive provider in the tristate region. Learn more at www.marshallhealth.org.

Merck
Media:
Claire Gillespie, (267) 305-0932
or
Jeanine Clemente, (908) 740-6268

Marshall Health
Media:
Sheanna Spence, (304) 691-1639

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