



MICHIGAN  
CATHOLIC  
CONFERENCE

# focus

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## CONFRONTING MICHIGAN'S OPIOID CRISIS

"Drugs have inflicted a deep wound on our society and ensnared many people in their web. Many victims have lost their freedom...enslaved by an addiction we could call 'chemical.'" —Pope Francis, Vatican Conference on Narcotics, 11/24/16

Substance abuse and its consequences are all too familiar for Americans. While society has struggled with addiction throughout history, the increased misuse of opioids—or drugs that help individuals manage pain—has contributed to a widespread crisis. Prescription opiates come in many forms to help with chronic and severe pain, including oxycodone (OxyContin® and Percocet®), hydrocodone (Vicodin® and Norco®, when combined with acetaminophen), codeine, methadone, morphine, meperidine (Demerol®), and fentanyl. While there are patients that genuinely benefit from this type of pain medication, steps must be taken to prevent its abuse, especially among children.

The United States consumes approximately eighty percent of the world's opiate supply, while its people account for less than five percent of the world's total population.<sup>1</sup> Use of heroin, an illegal opiate, has also increased. In some communities, heroin is cheaper and more easily accessible for purchase than prescription drugs. Three out of four new heroin users since 2000 indicated they began by abusing prescription drugs.<sup>2</sup> Alarming, the Centers for Disease Control indicates that rates of heroin use have more than doubled from 2002 to 2013 among individuals ages eighteen to twenty-five.

The devastation of this crisis cannot be ignored; individuals, families, and communities across Michigan and the country feel its impact daily. In 2014, the United States experienced one of the highest level of drug overdoses on record—47,055—with sixty-one percent involving opioids.<sup>3</sup> Michigan's rates were only slightly below the national average, with fifty-seven percent of the state's 1,745 overdoses involving opioids. Substance abuse also contributes to

additional medical costs, such as emergency room or intensive care visits. Over the course of a decade, the number of hospitalizations involving opioids more than doubled in the state, with Michigan's inpatient database showing 20,191 hospitalizations in 2011. In 2014, the Michigan Health and Hospital Service Corporation found 815 infants were born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, or drug withdrawal symptoms after birth, due to their mother's use of opiates or heroin. These infants often experience low birthweight, seizures, and breathing and feeding problems, which requires additional time and treatment in the hospital.

The statistics surrounding opioid abuse are distressing, but even more distressing is the human face of addiction, which includes relatives, neighbors, friends, parishioners, and community members. Addiction touches people of all backgrounds and races: rich or poor; man or woman; young, middle-aged, or elderly. Each has his or her own unique story, and "must be valued and appreciated...to be healed," as Pope Francis emphasized in a 2016 Vatican conference on narcotics. Michigan has only recently realized that arresting its way out of this community problem has only made the situation worse. Instead, more successful approaches to tackling the opioid crisis are emerging, bringing together law enforcement, the courts, treatment professionals, the faith community, and families across the state. Greater community collaboration offers safe and loving environments for those struggling with addiction, providing accountability, empathy, support, and compassion at critical times during the recovery process. This issue of **focus** explores the growing opioid crisis and efforts to address addiction by the Catholic Church and the State of Michigan. ■

# SUPPORTING THOSE WITH ADDICTION

“The Church is called to serve, to reach out, to help rebuild lives, and to support individuals, families, and communities in the fight against the slavery of drug and alcohol abuse.” —U.S. Bishops, *New Slavery New Freedom: A Pastoral Message on Substance Abuse*, 1990

Over twenty-five years ago, the bishops of the United States wrote that the Catholic Church should walk alongside those struggling with substance abuse. Within the pastoral statement *New Slavery New Freedom*, the bishops highlighted the “human devastation” caused by chemical dependency, which pushes individuals into “a world of lonely isolation” and low self-worth. Today that call continues to be relevant, as addiction tears apart families, contributes to increased crime, and raises health care costs. Motivated by faith, the Church is able to “share our hope and love” with those hurt by this epidemic, even when they are ashamed to ask for

help. Across Michigan, Catholic charitable agencies offer substance abuse counseling with the belief that each person “must be listened to, understood, loved...and healed” rather than judged.<sup>4</sup> Catholic health care centers contribute to prevention efforts and offer person-centered treatment, while Catholic parishes host recovery support groups and offer prayers and encouragement. In each of these actions, the Church reminds those in need they are not alone. ■

## SAFE DRUG DISPOSAL

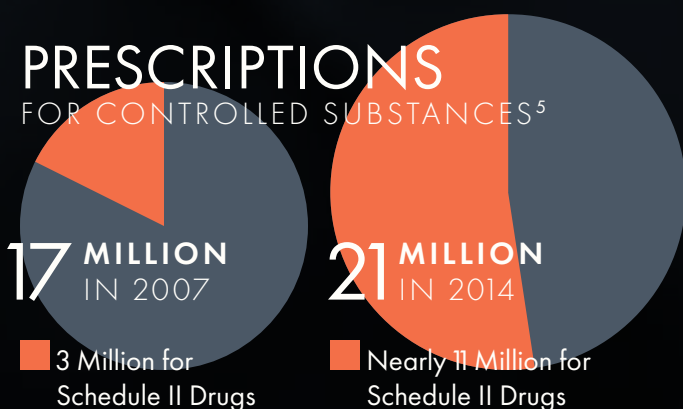
In 2009, a national survey on drug use from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) found over seventy percent of those who abused prescription painkillers obtained the drugs from friends or relatives. Properly disposing of prescription pain medications is an important step in preventing misuse. Individuals can safely and anonymously dispose of expired, unwanted, or unused prescription drugs (excluding liquids, inhalers, patches, or syringes) at any of the twenty-nine Michigan State Police posts across the state from Monday through Friday, 8:00 AM–4:00 PM. To find other drug disposal sites, visit <https://goo.gl/Li99Ff>. Additional information on safe disposal can be found at <https://www.michigan.gov/deqdrugdisposal>.

## MICHIGAN’S PRESCRIPTIONS BY THE NUMBERS

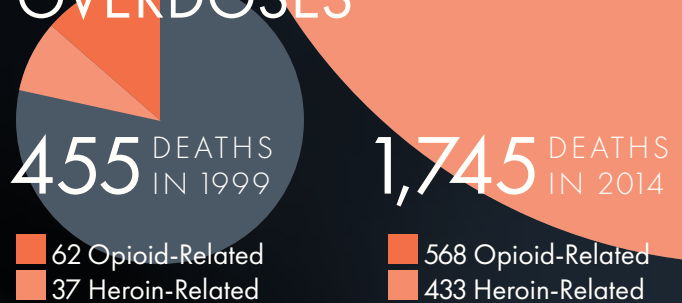
In 2014, 240 million prescription were written for opioids nationally. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services show that this is the equivalent of every American adult receiving one bottle of opioid pills. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) classifies drugs into five categories on a controlled substance list based on their acceptable medical use and potential for dependence or abuse. Schedule I drugs like heroin have no accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse, while Schedule V drugs have a low potential for abuse and low risk of dependence. Many

of the opioids that are typically abused are Schedule II drugs, such as oxycodone (OxyContin®), Vicodin®, and fentanyl. Below is a look at the numbers of prescriptions and dosage units written in Michigan for controlled substances, including Schedule II drugs, which have a high potential for abuse and dependence. ■

### PRESCRIPTIONS FOR CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES<sup>5</sup>



### DEATHS FROM DRUG OVERDOSES<sup>6</sup>





Most Reverend  
John Doerfler

On April 12, 2017, four faith communities in the Upper Peninsula, including the Catholic Diocese of Marquette, released an ecumenical statement on addictions. As addiction is an issue of concern across Michigan, an excerpt from this statement has been reprinted for wider circulation. The full statement is available at <https://goo.gl/2QzGgm>.

## ECUMENICAL STATEMENT ON ADDICTIONS

“The faith communities of the Upper Peninsula have seen the destruction caused by addiction in our communities, parishes and families. We are dedicated to help prevent this destruction by reaching out to all those in need. We want to provide hope to all of our families and friends plagued with destructive addiction behaviors.

Substance abuse and addiction impacts all of us. In spite of the best efforts to thwart illicit drugs or attempt to punish those who engage in their use, illegal drug abuse remains a deeply ingrained aspect of life in our Upper Peninsula community...As faith communities we cannot stand idly by and

## COMMENTARY

### ON ECUMENICAL STATEMENT ON ADDICTIONS

Confronted by the grave, extensive problems of addictions in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Bishop Rayford J. Ray of the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan, Reverend Thomas Skrenes, Bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The Reverend Elbert P. Dulworth, District Superintendent of the Marquette District of the United Methodist Church and I are moved at the depth of the suffering of individuals, families and society. The number of people impacted by addictions is staggering. We, as brothers in the Lord Jesus, have chosen to address the problem of addictions because reaching out to those in need is essential to living a Christian life. *We are called by the Lord to live out our faith not just behind church walls, but in loving service to our community.* The Bible exhorts us to care for the needs of our fellow human beings. For example, it says in the Letter of James (James 2:15–16): “If a brother or sister has nothing to

wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?” As followers of Jesus we cannot simply utter pious platitudes and turn our backs on our sisters and brothers who are suffering from addictions. The love of Christ moves us to embrace and walk with them. Moreover, we fellow Christian leaders act together as citizens. A good citizen cultivates the virtue of patriotism, which embodies the love of our country, our state and our local community. To be truly patriotic means to look beyond our own needs as individuals and offer ourselves in service to society. To be patriotic means to live with the common good in central focus. We address the problem of addictions as good citizens who want to make a difference.

**Most Reverend John Doerfler**  
Bishop of the Diocese of Marquette

do nothing as this epidemic threatens our communities. We must start by exposing the incidence of addiction and the havoc it brings to families and individuals. It is a disease that can be treated...

To the person suffering from addiction the path to recovery can appear scary and overwhelming, but as faith based communities, we serve as the outstretched hand to offer God’s love and new hope for those afflicted with this disease. Our faith communities wish to provide new hope to all those suffering from addiction and assure them that help for recovery is available. To those struggling with addiction we say: the loving hands of your faith communities stand ready to catch you and stand by your side to assist in bearing the cross that you carry from the darkness of addiction into the light along your path to recovery. We extend our hand to you and ask you to take our hand.” ■

# RESPONDING TO SUBSTANCE ABUSE

“MCC supports policies that ensure adequate resources for behavioral and physical health care, including addictions.”  
—Michigan Catholic Conference, *A Blueprint for the Common Good*, February 2017

Governor Rick Snyder formed a statewide task force in 2015 to study prescription drug and opioid abuse, with Lieutenant Governor Brian Calley serving as chairman. The task force, which included elected officials and members of the medical, law enforcement, and judicial communities, issued a series of recommendations for improving treatment and prevention procedures. In April 2017, one of these recommendations was completed when the Michigan Automated Prescription System (MAPS) was updated. MAPS tracks patient prescription history to prevent “doctor shopping” for prescription pills. The Michigan Legislature is now considering bipartisan measures to implement other task force recommendations, including those that would:

- Encourage greater discussion between patients and prescribers about proper disposal of medications and the dangers of opioid abuse,
- Require physicians to provide information on substance use disorder to patients who are treated for an opioid overdose,
- Improve services for those suffering from opioid addiction,
- Increase penalties for those who wrongfully prescribe, dispense, manufacture, or distribute controlled substances, and
- Create prescribing limits for opioids.

As discussions continue on these measures, balancing patient pain management needs and concerns about

prescription abuse is vital. Opioids are the appropriate answer for some Michiganders in consultation with their prescribers, but they are not the only pain management option. Patients and prescribers both benefit from learning about all pain management methods and from having further conversations about a drug’s potential for addiction. Efforts that raise awareness about these dangers, provide support to those who are struggling, and offer necessary training to medical professionals to address these issues are valuable legislative priorities.

Catholic teaching offers insight regarding the role of government in the fight against substance abuse. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraph 2211), the political community is tasked “to honor and assist the family,” protecting against the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse. Over the years, the U.S. bishops have advocated for policies to advance this goal. These policies include: providing adequate federal, state, and local resources for prevention and treatment services; seeking appropriate alternatives to incarceration for those who struggle with substance abuse; encouraging the expansion of drug courts to provide greater access to treatment programs (Michigan currently has eighty-four); and offering comprehensive educational programs on substance abuse in schools and community groups.<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, Pope Francis and the U.S. bishops have outlined the need to address underlying societal problems that allow drug abuse to flourish, such as poverty, a lack of meaningful employment, inadequate access to education, and poor housing. While in Rio in 2013, Pope Francis spoke to those recovering from addiction, saying that “promoting greater justice, educating young people in the values that build up life in society, and accompanying those in difficulty” are needed efforts to reduce the spread and influence of drug addiction. Without addressing these problems, individuals will continue to struggle with hopelessness, fear, or other difficulties that can lead to addiction. ■

1. Therapeutic Use, Abuse, and Nonmedical Use of Opioids, Pain Physician 2010, <https://goo.gl/IRqgHB> 2. Theodore Cicero et al, The Changing Face of Heroin Use in the United States, July 2014 3. A Profile of Drug Overdose Deaths Using MAPS, Michigan DCH, 2014, <https://goo.gl/BJ2lo9> 4. Data from the Michigan Automated Prescription Service 5. Data from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services through state death certificates 6. Pope Francis, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences Meeting on Narcotics, November 2016, <https://goo.gl/JIT740> 7. *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration*, USCCB, 2000, <http://goo.gl/Zq8FFU> and *New Slavery New Freedom*, NCCB, 1990, <https://goo.gl/xSxhZy>

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