



National Association of County & City Health Officials

The National Connection for Local Public Health

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NACCHO Applauds Merck Foundation and Marshall Health Initiative to Address Opioid Epidemic in West Virginia

Washington, DC, August 1, 2018 – [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 hardest hit by the opioid epidemic in West Virginia. West Virginia has the highest overdose rate in the United States — with opioids responsible for most overdose deaths — and ranks first nationally for rates of hepatitis B and second for rates of hepatitis C. The Great Rivers Region has the highest number of opioid-related deaths in the state and comprises Cabell, Jackson, Kanawha, and Putnam counties, located in the southwestern and central parts of the state.

With a \$2 million grant over four years from the Foundation, 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. [The National Association of County and City Health Officials](#) (NACCHO), representing the nation's nearly 3,000 local governmental health departments, applauds the Foundation's investment in this important effort to address the opioid epidemic and its infectious disease consequences.

“This initiative supports the movement from death prevention to disease prevention for opioid use in this region. Local health departments are integral contributing partners, helping save lives, ease suffering, prevent disease, and build health, thus strengthening our communities,” said Michael E. Kilkenny, physician director of the Cabell-Huntington Health Department and a member of NACCHO’s Board of Directors.

“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 chronic diseases,” said Lori Tremmel Freeman, MBA, NACCHO’s chief executive officer. “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.”

“The System is 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

We're proud to partner with Marshall Health in launching this critically needed solution to our country's most urgent public health crisis," said Dr. Julie L. Gerberding, chief patient officer, Merck and vice chair, Merck Foundation Board of Trustees. "We're optimistic that the Merck Foundation's support of the Great Rivers Regional System for Addiction Care will inspire others to join in combatting the opioid epidemic through similar innovative solutions."

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About NACCHO

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) represents the nation's nearly 3,000 local governmental health departments. These city, county, metropolitan, district, and tribal departments work every day to protect and promote health and well-being for all people in their communities. For more information about NACCHO, please visit www.naccho.org.