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## 1,451 TENNESSEANS DIE FROM DRUG OVERDOSES IN 2015

Deadly Epidemic of Substance Use Disorders Continues to Grow

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – Tennessee Department of Health data show 1,451 people died from drug overdoses in the state in 2015. This is the highest annual number of overdose deaths recorded in state history and brings the five-year total for Tennessee to 6,036 lives lost. That figure is approximately the equivalent of every person on 40 mid-size jet liners dying.

In 2015, the overdose death rate was 22 per 100,000 people. This compares with a rate of 14.7 per 100,000 people who died in motor vehicle accidents, as 970 Tennesseans died last year on the state's roadways.

"This is a disease every one of us is vulnerable to, not a moral failing. Not one of these victims deserved this, and the tragedy of lives lost to overdoses becomes even more painful knowing these deaths can be prevented and are the horrible tip of the overdose iceberg," said TDH Commissioner John Dreyzehner. "We've made progress in reducing the amount of powerful narcotics legally dispensed and in making the overdose antidote naloxone more readily available, but there are still many people battling substance use disorders without seeking professional help and many criminals willing to sell extremely dangerous pills, counterfeit pills and gray and illegal substances."

Tennessee confirmed drug overdose deaths and incidence rates per 100,000 people for the last five years are:

|             |              |           |
|-------------|--------------|-----------|
| <b>2015</b> | 1,451 deaths | 22.0 rate |
| <b>2014</b> | 1,263 deaths | 19.3 rate |
| <b>2013</b> | 1,166 deaths | 17.9 rate |
| <b>2012</b> | 1,094 deaths | 16.9 rate |
| <b>2011</b> | 1,062 deaths | 16.6 rate |

"It is always saddening when the reality of human tragedy involved with substance abuse is brought to light, especially given the fact that overdose deaths can absolutely be prevented," said Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services Commissioner Marie Williams.

"Overdose deaths are a frightening reality and this is why we urge you or anyone you know

suffering with a substance use disorder to seek help immediately by calling the Tennessee REDLINE (1-800-889-9789)."

To protect the identities of victims, the Tennessee Department of Health is not releasing data for counties with less than one dozen overdose deaths. Here is a list of confirmed drug overdose deaths for all other counties in 2015:

|           |     |            |     |
|-----------|-----|------------|-----|
| Anderson  | 26  | Maury      | 15  |
| Blount    | 33  | Monroe     | 12  |
| Bradley   | 20  | Montgomery | 36  |
| Campbell  | 21  | Putnam     | 15  |
| Carter    | 12  | Roane      | 21  |
| Cheatham  | 16  | Robertson  | 15  |
| Claiborne | 12  | Rutherford | 56  |
| Coffee    | 14  | Sevier     | 28  |
| Davidson  | 157 | Shelby     | 188 |
| Dickson   | 18  | Sullivan   | 35  |
| Franklin  | 13  | Sumner     | 24  |
| Hamblen   | 17  | Tipton     | 15  |
| Hamilton  | 59  | Washington | 30  |
| Hawkins   | 16  | Williamson | 25  |
| Knox      | 153 | Wilson     | 37  |

There were 62 counties in Tennessee in 2015 that had five or more overdose deaths. There were eight counties where no drug overdose deaths were documented: Haywood, Lake, Lauderdale, Perry, Pickett, Trousdale and Van Buren.

"This is a massive, alarming and ongoing rate of preventable death that stays too much in the shadows," Department of Safety and Homeland Security Commissioner David W. Purkey said. "Our state is struggling with overdose deaths, and we realize the urgency of working even closer with our colleagues on education and treatment in an effort to stop this epidemic. I urge our citizens to be careful and mindful about the risks associated with these dangerous drugs. We've got to stop this alarming fatality trend. I'll continue to work with Dr. Dreyzehner, TBI Director Mark Gwyn and Commissioner Marie Williams on strategies to overcome these shocking deaths."

Abuse and misuse of opioids continues to be a significant factor in Tennessee's crisis of drug overdose deaths. TDH data show nearly 72 percent of the 1,451 drug overdose deaths in Tennessee in 2015 involved opioids. Among the overdose deaths involving opioids, the vast majority were unintentional. Approximately 30 percent of opioid-related drug overdose deaths were confirmed to have included a combination of opioid and benzodiazepine medications, a particularly deadly combination. Deaths to which fentanyl was confirmed to have contributed rose significantly from 69 deaths in 2014 to 174 in 2015. Heroin-associated overdose deaths increased from 147 in 2014 to 205 in 2015.



“The problem of prescription drug abuse should trouble anyone who cares about the future of our state,” said Mark Gwyn, director of the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. “Those who are addicted often put themselves in even more danger by buying pills from dealers on the street, without knowing for sure what they contain. Some of those pills are counterfeit, full of dangerous substances like fentanyl, which has certainly contributed to the recent increase in overdose deaths in Tennessee. It can’t be said strongly enough: Turning to the streets to find your next fix isn’t the answer, and it might very well cost you your life.”

Thanks to an act of the Tennessee General Assembly earlier this year, authorized pharmacists across Tennessee can now dispense the drug overdose antidote naloxone to any person at risk of opioid overdose, or to a family member, friend of other person who may assist someone at risk of an opiate-related overdose. Administered quickly, naloxone can temporarily reverse the life-threatening effects of opioids until further medical treatment is provided. TDH has information on the law including training on the use of naloxone available online at <http://tn.gov/health/topic/information-for-naloxone>.

Substance abuse is treatable and preventable. For information on treatment services, please visit [www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/section/substance-abuse-services](http://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/section/substance-abuse-services). If you or someone you know is ready to get assistance with addiction, call the Tennessee REDLINE at 1-800-889-9789 or visit [www.taadas.org/Redline.htm](http://www.taadas.org/Redline.htm).

The mission of the Tennessee Department of Health is to protect, promote and improve the health and prosperity of people in Tennessee. TDH has facilities in all 95 counties and provides direct services for more than one in five Tennesseans annually as well as indirect services for everyone in the state, including emergency response to health threats, licensure of health professionals, regulation of health care facilities and inspection of food service establishments. Learn more about TDH services and programs at [www.tn.gov/health](http://www.tn.gov/health).

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**MEDIA NOTE:** A video statement from Commissioner Dreyzehner is available for your use at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WyfOio6ueg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WyfOio6ueg).

Interview segments with Commissioner Dreyzehner are also available for TV and radio use only at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHBxIEH5-nc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHBxIEH5-nc).

This news release can be accessed online at [www.tn.gov/health/news](http://www.tn.gov/health/news).

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