

Nassau Begins Distributing Millions to Drug Treatment Programs as Part of Opioids Lawsuit Settlement



Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman announced plans on Thursday to spend millions the county obtained from opioid settlement. Credit: Danielle Silverman

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Nassau is distributing \$2.4 million to drug treatment providers and community groups for programs designed to combat the opioid epidemic that has claimed thousands of Long Island lives since the late 1990s, County Executive Bruce Blakeman said Thursday.

The county plans to spend \$60 million — \$15 million annually — on drug prevention, education and treatment over the next four years from the settlement of the landmark lawsuit it filed against opioid manufacturer and distributors, according to Blakeman, who was joined by public health officials and county legislators during a news conference in Mineola.

Blakeman invited drug treatment and prevention organizations to submit proposals for programs to combat opioid abuse and fatal overdoses, which have skyrocketed on Long Island in recent years due to the isolation and stress brought by the coronavirus pandemic.

"We are opening the process up to any provider, whether it be for educational services, treatment services or counseling or prevention, and we are asking those groups to respond and tell us what you are doing, how many people you service and what your vision is and how you are going to spend the

money," Blakeman said. "We want to make sure this that money goes for treatment, for prevention and for education and counseling."

Nassau has already received the \$60 million. The county could ultimately receive \$180 million from the settlement, Blakeman said.

Nassau University Medical Center will receive \$2 million of the \$2.4 million, Blakeman said. Matthew Bruderman, the chairman of the NUMC board of directors, said the money will be used to expand its detox services.

"We have already been planning the expansion of this department in advance of the announcement, so the impact of these resources will be felt by our community as quickly as possible," Bruderman said. "That will save lives."

Catholic Health's Mercy Hospital will receive \$180,000, which president Joe Manopella said will be used to expand detox, treatment and family counseling at its five Nassau County facilities.

"We are committed to using the funds to continue to address the opioid epidemic through robust chemical dependency and substance use programs that include resources for not only the patient but for the family as well," Manopella said.

The Hispanic Counseling Center, the Charles Evans Center of Glen Cove, the South Shore Children's Guidance Center, the YES Community Counseling Center and the Mental Health Association of Nassau will each receive \$60,000. The grants announced on Thursday will be renewed every year for the next three years unless county officials determine that the money has been misused, Blakeman said.

In 2016, Suffolk became the first county in New York to file a lawsuit against drug companies for their role in fueling the opioid epidemic and was later joined by Nassau County and the New York Attorney General's Office in the action. The complaint said the drug manufacturers and distributors created a public nuisance by downplaying the risk of addiction and dishonestly and aggressively promoting the use of opioid painkillers.

Many of the original defendants — including well-known companies such as Johnson & Johnson, Walmart, Walgreens, CVS and Rite Aid — agreed to settlements before the lawsuit went to trial in June 2021 in Central Islip, while others reached deals with the state and the counties during the trial.

Jeffrey Reynolds, the CEO and president of the Family & Children's Association, which provides drug treatment and recovery support, questioned why Nassau officials have not rolled out plans to distribute opioid settlement funds sooner. Speaking at an International Overdose Awareness Day event in Hauppauge on Aug. 31, Reynolds said almost 700 people — almost two a day — died in Nassau and Suffolk from fatal overdoses in 2021.

Blakeman said Nassau officials have been deliberate in developing plans for the settlement money because they want to make sure it is spent effectively.

"This is really important that this money be used appropriately, and we are going to vet the process and make sure," Blakeman said.