https://www.gloucestertimes.com/news/local_news/essex-asking-how-opioid-money-should-be-used/article_caa6248e-98de-400d-bd88-ad5b3bff41e1.html

Essex asking how opioid money should be used

By Stephen Hagan | Staff Writer
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ESSEX — To satisfy the terms of recent legal settlements between Massachusetts and the opioid industry, the town is seeking input from residents.

The Essex Board of Health is conducting a survey to gather input about respondents' experiences related to opioid and substance use disorders.

Town officials say the information shared on the survey will enable the Board of Health to focus on areas that need change, help it develop recommendations that address community needs, and help it identify opportunities for innovation, collaboration and/or enhancement to current programming.

Erin Kirchner, the Board of Health administrator, said town officials are required to seek and utilize community input to determine how to allocate the town's portion of the opioid settlement funding. Essex is due to receive approximately $40,000 total over an 18-year period, from 2023 to 2039.

"Specifically, we must engage with individuals who have lived and (are) living experience with substance use and misuse," Kirchner said. "Furthermore, we are strictly permitted to utilize these funds for targeted expenditures that address four primary goals: prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery."

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Kirchner said the surveying is not unique to Essex.

“This is, will be, or has already happened in other communities,” she said. “We’re all required to seek community input to determine how these funds will be used.”

Over the past few years, a number of legal settlements between drug companies and the state have led to payouts that have meant millions for Massachusetts. Included in those decisions was a 2021 $26 billion rendering with opioid distributor Johnson & Johnson that resulted in more than $500 million for the state and its cities and towns for prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery efforts.

Kirchner expects the survey will be conducted for another two to three weeks. Information gathered will inform the next steps in the community engagement process. Those steps will be include listening sessions and smaller focus groups comprised of community partners, those who have experience with substance use, and survey respondents who expressed interest in further participation, she said.

“Once the information gathering process is complete, we will pool resources with neighboring municipalities whose needs align with ours,” Kirchner said. “Receiving $40,000 over 18 years won’t go very far when trying to address the opioid epidemic and collaborating with other communities will allow us to maximize our impact.”

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Further information about the Opioid Settlement Funds Community Survey has been posted on the town of Essex website at https://www.essexma.org/m/newsflash/home/detail/49.

The survey itself is available at https://bit.ly/4wvQwzn.

Some survey questions are:

Have you or someone in your family accessed treatment services for substance use? If so, which services?

What barriers or gaps have you seen or encountered when seeking services (treatment, recovery support, harm reduction, etc.) for yourself or a loved one?

How do you feel Essex could best utilize the Opioid Settlement funds to support people affected by the opioid epidemic in our community?

Would you like to take part in a future focus group Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

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>
> — Erin Kirchner, Essex Board of Health administrator

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