

CALIFORNIA CONTINUES COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO COMBAT THE OPIOID CRISIS

State Launches “Empowering Faith Leaders in California Substance Use Prevention and Intervention” Project

Continues CalBridge Investments to Support Access to Behavioral Health and Substance Use Disorder Treatment

SACRAMENTO — The Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) has launched the *Empowering Faith Leaders in California* project, in partnership with the Clinton Foundation’s Global Initiative’s Overdose Response Network, and is investing in hospital emergency departments to continue to assist Californians in need of substance use disorder (SUD) treatment and mental health treatment services.

The *Empowering Faith Leaders in California* project will help address the opioid overdose and addiction crisis at the local level through a collaborative learning opportunity that will empower participating religious leaders from diverse faith traditions to respond to SUDs in their communities, using evidence-informed and compassionate approaches.

“We are pleased to support this project and provide California’s faith leaders with invaluable tools to help combat the opioid epidemic,” said **DHCS Director Michelle Baass**.

“Faith leaders have a unique ability to help foster change and shape, influence, and inform the attitudes that so often lead to inequities,” said **Christian Thrasher, Chief Executive Officer of the Clinton Foundation’s Global Initiative’s Overdose Response Network**. “Changing the mindset that addiction is not a moral failing, but rather a treatable brain disease, will be key to fighting and beating this epidemic.”

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT: Faith leaders are a trusted source of support and often provide information and guidance to individuals, households, and communities. As such, faith leaders are a vital part of the solution to confront the overdose crisis. However, without formal education on addiction and the harmful effects of stigma, many faith leaders may not engage in this work.

Additionally, DHCS announced an investment of [\\$1.65 million to 66 hospitals](#) (\$25,000 each) with emergency departments (EDs) to provide them with resources to continue their CalBridge Behavioral Health Navigator Program through April 30, 2024.

WHY THIS MATTERS: CalBridge provides grants to EDs to expand training for behavioral health navigators so they can provide access to SUD and mental health treatment services. By sustaining the number of behavioral health navigators in EDs, people with a SUD or opioid use disorder, or who are experiencing a mental health crisis, will have access to appropriate care to address their needs. CalBridge supports all participating hospitals with access to materials, training, and technical assistance for navigators, clinicians, nurses, community health workers, and other hospital staff and stakeholders.

The latest round of awards aligns with the state's broad strategy to build a health workforce that represents California's diverse communities and provides people with the quality care they deserve, while addressing the shortage of health workers across California. To date, \$67 million has been invested in the CalBridge program, which aims to train, diversify, and expand the workforce in EDs to address the urgent need for behavioral health patient care. CalBridge has demonstrated exceptional outcomes since 2018, with a total of 362,730 patients treated for SUDs. Of those individuals admitted for treatment, 278,872 patients were identified as having an opioid use disorder, and 112,944 patients were prescribed or administered Medication Assisted Treatment.

FAITH LEADERS MAKING A DIFFERENCE:

- "Empowering faith leaders is a critical component of faith communities being able to address the growing crisis of substance use," said **Reverend Melissa Maher, Empowering Faith Leaders Program Graduate and Director, New Ministries Strategies, Texas Annual Conference United Methodist Church**. "As a pastor for 15 years, I regularly sit with families who suffer in silence from the dark shadows of addiction. Candidly, they suffer in silence because the Church has often been silent (or uniformed) on the disease of addiction. This program provides the tools that faith leaders need to be agents of compassion and change."
- "Faith leaders are integral in fighting the overdose crisis that has reached unprecedented levels in this country," said **Megan Affrunti, Senior Director of Substance Use Disorders and Recovery of the Clinton Foundation's Global Initiative's Overdose Response Network**. "Many people turn to their faith leaders during times of crisis for guidance and hope, and when they are prepared to provide effective support, they can save lives. We know that many faith leaders aren't taught how to respond to these issues in seminary, and our program fills this gap by training and mobilizing them to address these issues with evidence-informed and compassionate approaches."

ABOUT EMPOWERING FAITH LEADERS IN CALIFORNIA: The *Empowering Faith Leaders in California* project will focus on two new California cities each year for two years and will directly engage and train cohorts of twenty faith leaders per city. The first year of the project includes the cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Over the next nine months of the project, the Clinton Foundation will convene faith leaders for discussions, lectures, and trainings about the overdose and addiction crisis, provide evidence-informed strategies for prevention, treatment, and recovery, and introduce faith leaders to local resources, including prevention and recovery organizations.

DHCS provided the project with \$1.8 million in state funds to train and mentor faith leaders to address the opioid crisis within their faith community and in their local community. The Clinton Foundation will work with each faith leader to execute a community-based engagement project to raise awareness about addiction, reduce stigma, and share life-saving resources. This will include how to recognize and respond to an opioid overdose with naloxone and other strategies designed to help faith leaders combat the opioid crisis. Faith leaders will also join a statewide and national network of faith leaders who have participated in the project and continue to make a difference in their communities.

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