

UO Students Seek Change and Visibility for Fentanyl Epidemic

From Jan. 2021 to Jan. 2022, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that 107,375 people in the United States died from a drug overdose. Of those cases, 67% involved illicit fentanyl.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid often laced with other drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine. Its contents are 50-100 times stronger than morphine: another opiate often used as a pain medication.

A lethal dose of fentanyl is around two milligrams. It is tasteless and odorless, which poses a significant threat when laced with another drug. Due to its undetectable nature, fentanyl has become one of the deadliest drugs to sweep the nation in recent years.

In order to increase profits, drug traffickers typically mix fentanyl with other drugs and sell it to unsuspecting individuals. Due to the demographic of recreational drug users, drug traffickers often target teenagers and young adults. College campuses have noticed a staggering increase in fentanyl-related incidents and deaths.

While fentanyl is often deadly, there is a life-saving drug called Naloxone, that can be distributed via a nasal spray. A common brand name associated with the nasal spray option is Narcan. With proper administration, Narcan is an efficient tool used to combat the effects of opioid overdose.

At the University of Oregon, its students advocate for the widespread distribution of Narcan as an integral tool in harm reduction. The Associated Students at the University of Oregon, or ASUO, are proponents of Narcan distribution and encourage the destigmatization of drug addiction as a whole.

Kavi Shrestha, ASUO's Executive Vice President, believes the disbursement of Narcan on campuses would equip students with the necessary tools to combat this epidemic.

Macy Patel, Executive Policy Secretary of ASUO, has spearheaded this effort alongside Shrestha. The sheer lack of awareness and education surrounding drug addiction can lead to an influx of misinformation.

“No matter where the addiction comes from, it's just as harmful. It's not the person's fault,” said Patel. “These drugs are heavily addictive and I think people should know that addiction happens and it's normal. It's something a lot of people want to work through, but often cannot control.”

Additionally, Patel expressed how important it is to allocate resources to those who experience drug addiction. While harm reduction is just as important, addiction treatment should not be overshadowed.

“That's something I'm always thinking about within this work. Addiction is often close to a lot of people. It needs to be destigmatized as a whole.” said Patel.

On Oct. 25, 2022, the Eugene Police Department seized 18 pounds of alleged illicit fentanyl from a car on 11th Avenue and High Street, less than a mile away from the university's campus.

Due to its concentrated substance, this amount of fentanyl was enough to kill an estimated four million people.

In response to this bust, Eugene Police Spokeswoman, Melinda McLaughlin stated, “Eugene Police has seen fentanyl contamination in cheap, counterfeit pills sold as common medications such as oxycodone, Adderall or Xanax.”

In the same news release, McLaughlin said fentanyl is easily disguised as another drug, such as cocaine, and urged people to be wary of this common deception.

“We also have reports of fentanyl being found in white or colored powdered drugs that might be sold as cocaine, MDMA or methamphetamine,” said McLaughlin.

This bust comes only months after EPD recovered 11,000 pills of suspected fentanyl in May 2022, where two individuals were arrested and arraigned on possession.

These busts exemplify the unrelenting rise of fentanyl in the Eugene community.

This issue is dire — affecting not only UO students, but the Eugene community and admin should treat it as such.

In an article from Multnomah County from April 20, 2021, Lane County Public Health warned citizens about taking drugs not obtained from a pharmacy. They recommend carrying Narcan to anyone who uses drugs or knows someone who does.

According to KLCC, earlier that year, in July 2022, EPD responded to five overdoses that took place within a seven-hour time period. The officers on sight administered Narcan and no fatalities ensued.

In Oregon, deaths from fentanyl overdoses increased by 41% in 2021.

On Dec. 21, 2022, their research deduced, “the number of opioid overdose visits to EDs and UCCs in 2022 are higher than previous years.”

In an effort to combat this crisis, ASUO has encouraged the distribution of Narcan across UO’s campus.

ASUO has partnered with Henry’s Uncle, a non-profit started by a former UO student, Erik Kilgore. In 2014, Kilgore’s brother passed away from an overdose involving illicit fentanyl. Kilgore started the organization in order to raise awareness and contest the stigma surrounding drug addiction.

In Nov. 2022, ASUO hosted its annual Fall Street Faire, where they partnered with Henry’s Uncle and Students for Global Health (SGH) to administer Narcan to students at the Street Faire.

This effort supplied approximately 500 Narcan kits to students. This is part of what ASUO hopes to continue to do in the future, in addition to providing training on how to properly administer Narcan to people in need.

Similarly, SGH has been consistent in their efforts to raise awareness about the fentanyl crisis. They've planned Narcan training events alongside the HIV Alliance and the UO Substance Abuse Prevention and Education program.

Brian Bectone, a UO student and member of SGH, expressed how frustrating the lack of action from admin can be for someone who is so passionate about this issue.

“We know there are other universities in-state, such as Southern Oregon University, where the school supplies and funds Narcan for all the buildings — we would like to get there too,” said Bectone.

While Narcan distribution is not where ASUO would like it to be, Bectone mentioned the appreciation he has for the organization's efforts.

“On a more positive note, with the help of the ASUO administration, who have been pushing this, it seems promising that we're gonna make progress. I'm frustrated that we haven't made progress yet, but I'm also optimistic for the future.”

Susie Colyar, another member of SGH, feels that breaking the stigma around addiction is one of the first steps towards change.

“I want to emphasize that addiction is a disorder. The issues we see regarding opioid use are not individual failures, but systemic ones,” said Colyar. “Rather than placing the blame on drug users, its very important to acknowledge the role of big pharma in creating this epidemic.”

Colyar, who has family members that struggle with addiction, holds this issue close to her heart.

“Doing this work feels like what I’m meant to be doing — trying to make our communities safer,” she said. “For an issue as complicated and stigmatized as drug use, nothing productive comes from individual blame. Rather, we must show empathy and build systemic, long lasting solutions.”

After the success of the Street Faire distribution, survey data collected revealed that 63.5% of students were unsure of where to get Narcan outside of distribution events.

Additionally, 85% of students said the university does not provide nearly enough adequate training and education about overdose prevention, nor do they have ways for students to safely access Narcan.

99% of those who responded to the survey said they would be interested in Narcan training.

This response, along with the wide-scale successful distribution of Narcan, revealed that there is an ever-present growing interest in harm reduction and drug safety on the UO campus and beyond.

As of November, ASUO has worked alongside representatives from the Dean of Students, Greek Life leaders and elected officials to help expand this project and make campus a safer space for students.

ASUO’s goals for the future of this project include Narcan distribution on a wide scale. Narcan is proven to reverse the effects of opioid overdose, and students should have adequate access to this life-saving resource.

Additionally, ASUO encourages education on harm reduction and building relationships between student organizations to impart social change and legislative action at the local and state level.

Citations:

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