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SKID ROW'S HOMELESS LEARN HOW TO PREVENT FATAL OVERDOSES

Homeless Health Care Los Angeles implements LA's first Overdose Prevention and Response Program for the City's homeless

LOS ANGELES, January 17, 2008– Homeless Skid Row residents have reported using the skills they learned ***to respond to 32 potentially fatal opiate overdoses among fellow injection drug users. In all but four cases, the responder successfully revived the potential overdose victim.*** These Skid Row "life savers" are part of an innovative overdose prevention and response training that was launched in September 2006. The program is the first of its kind in Los Angeles and is a creative expansion of Homeless Health Care Los Angeles' numerous services offered for the homeless population in Skid Row.

With recent passage of California Senate Bill (SB) 767, the Overdose Treatment Liability Act, signed by Governor Schwarzenegger in October 2007, overdose prevention and response programs like the one offered by Homeless Health Care Los Angeles are now afforded protection from criminal and civil liability. With leadership from Senator Mark Ridley-Thomas, the author of SB 767, California legislators recognized the importance of access to naloxone. Naloxone is a very safe drug that lay people, with appropriate training, can safely and properly administer. "Homeless Health Care LA's program will provide critical access to life saving services for drug users and help decrease the number of potentially fatal overdoses," said Senator Ridley-Thomas.

Drug overdose, entirely preventable, is the second leading cause of accidental death in the United States. Naloxone is the same tool used by paramedics and hospitals to treat heroin overdoses. When a person overdoses on opioids (heroin, morphine, methadone, oxycontin, etc.), he/she is rendered unconscious and in danger of dying because the opioids make the person's breathing slow down, and eventually stop. Naloxone counteracts the life-threatening depression of the central nervous and respiratory systems allowing the person to return to normal breathing.

Until now, doctors deterred from widely prescribing naloxone, even though the drug has no effect on someone who does not have opiates in their system, and is regulated at the same level as prescription ibuprofen. SB 767 makes it possible to get naloxone into the hands of the people who are the most likely to be bystanders to opioid overdoses, increasing the likelihood that people overdosing on opioids will get the help they need promptly. It will ultimately save lives that may otherwise have been lost.

Since September 20 2006, 90 participants have undergone the Homeless Health Care Los Angeles (HHCLA) training that includes instruction in the administration of Naloxone, the biological process of overdose, overdose risk factors, rescue breathing, and calling for professional responders to ensure that victims receive appropriate medical care. Participants in

the Overdose Prevention and Response Training Program are primarily clients of HHCLA's syringe exchange program offered at its Harm Reduction Center or through contact with HHCLA's outreach staff in Skid Row. The training is voluntary and participants receive no financial compensation for their service to the community.

After completing the training, each participant receives a prescription of Naloxone from HHCLA's on-site physician, Dr. Susan Partovi. "I am profoundly moved by my clients because they spend time to learn about and take on the responsibility of rescuing someone else. To hear the stories of when they actually saved someone's life validates the importance of our overdose prevention work. They are showing they care about the welfare of strangers and have the intellect and ability to respond in a crisis situation. Yes, we're saving lives, and that's amazing in itself. But, we're also creating leaders within this population. Something I didn't foresee from this project," says Dr. Partovi.

HHCLA has met with local law enforcement officials to educate them about the program, and to ensure that program participants will not be penalized for their possession of Naloxone, which is a legal, prescribed, non-scheduled drug. To date, four participants have reported having their Naloxone prescriptions confiscated by police.

In conjunction with HHCLA, the Institute for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at the University of Southern California's Keck School of Medicine is conducting an ongoing evaluation study in order to assess the effectiveness of the program. Karla Wagner, a doctoral student at the Institute for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, leads the study. "Evaluating this program is a great way to learn how well program participants respond to the training. We're able to document improvements in the types of techniques that drug users use to respond to opiate overdoses, while also identifying barriers to their success, such as the loss or confiscation of their Naloxone. We hope that this small study will provide data that will help with the dissemination of this type of training on a larger scale," said Wagner.

About Homeless Health Care Los Angeles (HHCLA)

HHCLA was established as a non-profit, community-based organization in 1985 to meet the health care needs of individuals that are homeless in Los Angeles County. For more than 20 years HHCLA has been providing ongoing street outreach, harm reduction services, substance use treatment, mental health care, health services and housing for LA's homeless.

In 1999, HHCLA established a Harm Reduction Center to provide services for injection drug users in the Skid Row area. In addition to the Overdose Prevention and Response training, the Skid Row site offers a number of other services– syringe exchange services, wound care and medical treatment, referrals to drug detoxification and treatment, case management, and referrals for housing.

Currently, the HHCLA Overdose Prevention and Response Training Program is funded through private donations and receives no public funding.

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