



Welcome, everybody. Thank you all for joining us today for the announcement of a much-needed initiative to address a sickness that's plaguing our state.

It's no secret that Montana has a substance abuse problem.

- Since 1980, drug offense rates in Montana have increased 559%.
- From 2013 to 2016, the State crime lab has experienced a 143 percent increase in substance samples testing positive for Methamphetamine and a 475 percent increase in substance samples testing positive for heroin.
- An estimated 1 in 10 Montanans is dependent on or abusing alcohol or drugs.

This problem is a complex creature, fueled by a variety of sources. Abuse of prescription drugs continues to increase, leading to a staggering number of overdose deaths. Drug Cartels from Central and South America exploit demand for drugs in North America, flooding our communities with addictive and dangerous substances that poison thousands of people every day. Unfortunately, the status quo for addressing substance abuse in Montana consists of a hodge-podge of well-intentioned, but inadequate responses.

We know that Department of Corrections has programs to address and assist inmates addicted to substances. We know that the Department of Public Health and Human Services has programs to treat Montanans battling addiction. We know that schools across the state try extremely hard to educate students about the dangers of abusing drugs and alcohol. We know that the judicial system has procedures in place to identify and address crimes fueled by substance abuse and addiction. And we know that the Department of Justice has a variety of law enforcement programs in place to combat the effects of substance abuse.

But what we don't know is how all of these programs can work together in the most efficient and effective manner. The statistics are clear: what Montana is doing now isn't enough. It's time for something new.

Today, I'm announcing Aid Montana: Addressing the Impact of Drugs. A collaborative effort led by my office to develop a strategic plan to combat substance abuse in Montana. The Department of Justice will work with a broad coalition of stakeholders to formulate this plan, which will include a multi-faceted approach to address this problem.

I want to emphasize that this plan will be a comprehensive approach to addressing substance abuse in Montana. While law enforcement will certainly be one method of addressing substance abuse, it certainly isn't the only approach. Treatment, education and coordination efforts are critical if we are to get ahead of this problem, and will be central components to our strategy.

Over the summer, my office will partner with the Montana Healthcare Foundation to hold six listening sessions across the state to hear real life experiences of individuals affected by substance abuse. At these listening sessions, we hope to hear a variety of stories, including those from people who've been affected by drugs in their homes; businesses owners who've had their work place affected by substance abuse; healthcare and social work professionals who see the effects of drugs on a daily basis; and community leaders who want to find public policy solutions to address this problem.

This fall, the Healthcare Foundation and the Montana Department of Justice will hold a Substance abuse and addiction summit, aimed at bringing stakeholders together all in one place to find out what works, and what we need to do moving forward.

It is our goal to have our strategic plan completed before the 2019 legislative session. We want to present a "roadmap" to lawmakers that outlines what needs to be done at the legislative level to efficiently and effectively combat this problem. Whether it be shifting resources to find where they are most effective, or changing laws to better reflect the reality of the problem, we want policymakers to have a clear understanding of what needs to be done.

And we've already started this process. Last fall, I directed my staff to comprehensively identifying specifics related to how the state of Montana currently addresses substance abuse. We hope to have a preliminary report outlining our findings early this fall.

I also want to take a moment to recognize two individuals with us today. While there are countless Montanans who have committed an enormous amount of time and energy to combat substance abuse, I want to applaud the efforts of Senators Diane Sands and Eric Moore for organizing an informational summit back in February to discuss substance abuse. It's frank, straightforward discussions like that summit that will provide much of the insight needed to formulate our strategic plan. The commitment of both Senator Moore and Senator Sands to

address this problem is exactly the type of determination that we all must adopt if we are to succeed. Thank you both for your work on this issue.

The system in place to help those with substance abuse problems in Montana should work like a well-oiled machine, with all of the parts synchronized, working together through consistent and effective communication, operating as a sophisticated apparatus. And to do this, we need everyone on the same page. The cost of doing nothing is too great to ignore.

The upward financial pressure on Montana's budget caused by illicit drug use is incredibly impactful. More children involved with Child and Family Services, a greater caseload moving through our judicial system, rapidly growing populations in our corrections facilities-- the list goes on and on. And with each additional dollar spent on growing populations for these reactive services comes a reduction in valuable resources elsewhere.

But while the "dollars and cents" cost is staggering, the financial toll to government budgets and economic activity pales in comparison to the lives affected by substance abuse. It's the little boy and girl who will never know their mother or father because of an overdose or homicide. It's the parents who lost a child to drug fueled violence. It's the teacher who lost a student due to drug stimulated abuse at home. The ripple effects of dangerous drugs touches each of our lives in some form or another.

This is an incredibly complex problem and formulating this plan will be no small undertaking. But we have incredible people in this state, and I know that if we put our heads together, we can accomplish great things. I hope that what we achieve through this initiative will have a lasting effect on Montana for decades to come.

Fighting the effects of dangerous drugs should be immune from partisan politics, as I believe we each have a moral obligation to do our part. I encourage all Montanans to join me in this fight, because together, we can solve this problem.

Thank you, I'll now take a few questions.