

ALERT TOP STORY

HEALING CAYUGA

Healing Cayuga: County announces plans for opioid settlement funds

Lauren J. Walsh Special to The Citizen

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A rainbow lights up the sky while Kevin Jones addresses the crowd about losing a child to drug addiction during a Cayuga County addiction recovery support group vigil at Nick's Ride 4 Friends in Auburn for International Overdose Awareness Day 2022.

Kevin Rivoli, The Citizen

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In the initial round of allocations, Cayuga County dedicated \$245,000 of opioid settlement funds to expand substance use prevention in schools, recovery peer support services, removal of barriers to treatment, Narcan distribution and countywide substance use response

coordination and data surveillance efforts. It is believed that these ready-to-go programs will play a significant role in addressing the ever-evolving challenges of opioid and substance use in the county.

As the opioid epidemic continued to soar over the last few years, the New York state attorney general filed a lawsuit against various manufacturers and distributors to hold them accountable for their role in the epidemic and the suffering it caused. Several settlement agreements have been reached, and more are being negotiated. Funds that are received through these settlements will be allocated among state agencies and localities.

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Cayuga County is expected to receive \$1.5 million in a series of one-time and recurring payments over the next 17 years. The county Legislature directed all payments made to the county to be used for approved uses per settlement stipulation and directed the Community Services Board to develop recommendations for opioid and substance use projects to be funded with opioid settlement funds. The CSB, as established by the New York State Mental Hygiene Law, is charged with maintaining and overseeing all mental hygiene services in the county, including services for mental health, developmental disabilities, and alcohol and substance use. Members of the CSB are appointed by the county Legislature for a four-year term.

Members of the CSB subcommittee on alcohol and substance use met for a special meeting in October 2022 to hear presentations on substance use prevention and treatment gaps and needs to provide the CSB with relevant data. The CSB then developed a request for proposals that were to address these identified gaps and needs, and approved the RFP at its November meeting. The RFP was published and 13 proposals were received by the December deadline. The proposals were distributed to CSB members for their review and in a special meeting in January, the proposals were discussed and ranked based on the RFP requirements, allowable uses under the settlement agreements, the needs they addressed and the viability of the projects. After careful consideration, members identified the following proposals and recommended them to the county Legislature for immediate funding totaling \$245,000 for one year.

- Confidential Help for Alcohol and Drugs will expand evidence-based substance use prevention and counseling services and programming to all county school districts.
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- Nick's Ride 4 Friends will embed recovery peer services in the Auburn Community Hospital emergency and behavioral health departments, provide linkage to and assistance with emergency housing services upon discharge, and help remove barriers to treatment.
- The Cayuga County Community Mental Health Center will continue to lead the coordination of the county's substance use response efforts, provide comprehensive community Narcan training and distribution through its Opioid Overdose Prevention Program, and maintain the countywide overdose data surveillance and reporting.

The county Legislature, at its February meeting, approved these initial programs to be funded with opioid settlement money. Implementation will begin immediately and agencies will provide regular impact and outcome reports to the CSB. A future meeting will be scheduled to discuss funding for additional proposals.

Lauren J. Walsh, LCSW-R, is the director of community services for Cayuga County and the director of the Cayuga County Community Mental Health Center. Walsh also serves as the chief executive officer of the Cayuga County Community Services Board.