

Governor, AG Slam Republicans for Again Delaying Funds to Combat Opioid Epidemic

Written by GOV Press Wisconsin
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Anonymous GOP objection delays \$6 million in settlement funds from pharmaceutical manufacturer and distributors for opioid and substance misuse prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery programming.

MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers and Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) Attorney General Josh Kaul today slammed Republicans on the Wisconsin State Legislature’s Joint Committee on Finance (JFC) for [delaying a plan](#) to use the first tranche of Wisconsin’s \$31 million in National Prescription Opiate Litigation (NPOL) settlement funds to combat the state’s opioid epidemic. The funds were awarded as part of agreements that Attorney General Kaul entered into with pharmaceutical companies, settling the state’s legal claims. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) received its first \$6 million payment on July 29 to begin using immediately, while the remaining \$25 million is expected by the end of the calendar year.

Last year, Gov. Evers [signed](#) Assembly Bill 374, now [2021 Wisconsin Act 57](#) (Act 57), into law, paving the way for much-needed funds to flow to communities throughout Wisconsin to address the opioid epidemic through a settlement with opioid manufacturers and distributors. Act 57 also requires that DHS receives 30 percent of the total allotment of NPOL funds, while counties and municipalities that participated in the litigation receive the remaining 70 percent. The final settlement

[agreement](#) approved by JFC in November 2021 will provide more than \$280 million over 18 years to the 87 local governments involved in the litigation and \$120 million, as well as \$9.6 million in additional restitution, to DHS for programs aimed at fighting the opioid epidemic and saving lives.

Under Act 57, DHS is required to submit a plan to use the state’s opioid settlement funds to JFC

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for the committee's approval under a 14-day passive review period. Under the passive review process, if no objection is raised by a JFC member, the plan is considered approved by the committee and funds are released. During that 14-day period, however, a member may object to the item, and because the Legislature has excluded themselves from record-keeping requirements, JFC members can functionally anonymously object to the item. Today, a member of JFC once again [objected](#) to the state plan to immediately use available settlement funds to combat the state's opioid epidemic. As no Democratic committee member objected to the plan, the objection could only have been raised by a Republican JFC member. This is [not the first time](#)

Republicans on the committee have come under fire for using the objection process to delay the expeditious release and use of funds. A full list of committee membership is available [here](#)

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"Wisconsinites across our state have felt firsthand the effects of the opioid epidemic on their loved ones, friends, and neighbors, and these families and communities need these funds now to fight the opioid epidemic and get resources to folks who need our help," said Gov. Evers. "The opportunity to invest millions into getting people treatment, support, and services does not come along every day. For these legislators to turn their backs on the people of Wisconsin, especially given increases in substance misuse and the mental and behavioral health challenges our state is facing today in the wake of the pandemic, it simply defies logic."

The most recent delay also marks the second time in recent months that JFC Republicans have objected to the state plan, once again delaying funds that could be immediately invested to combat the opioid epidemic across Wisconsin. In April, DHS submitted an initial plan in advance of having received any of the state's settlement fund allotment so the state could begin implementing the plan as soon as it received its first tranche of funds. A Republican JFC member objected to a revision of the first proposal made by DHS to reflect how the payments would be received. DHS resubmitted the plan on July 28, for the committee's consideration under the passive review process, to which a JFC Republican member objected today. Last week, DHS Secretary-designee Karen Timberlake, Attorney General Kaul, and Paul Krupski, DHS Director of Opioid Initiatives, participated in a media briefing to provide details and explanations for the items included in the settlement plan. That briefing is available to [watch on YouTube](#)

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“Wisconsin communities need funding to fight the opioid epidemic now,” said Attorney General Kaul. “Wisconsin DOJ has fought hard and continues to fight to bring substantial resources to Wisconsin to combat the opioid epidemic, and there’s no good reason for Republican legislators to stand in the way of getting funds distributed that will save lives.”

Wisconsin’s opioid crisis began in the late 1990s and has been evolving since, with an almost 900 percent increase in [opioid overdose deaths](#) between 1999 and 2018, and in 2020, the state saw a record high of 1,227 opioid-related overdose deaths. The state has seen a surge due in part to the coronavirus pandemic, drugs laced with synthetic substances, like fentanyl, and the use of multiple substances. While the state continues its all-hands-on-deck approach to addressing the epidemic through state and federal dollars, the settlement funds allow the state to do even more, faster, with an approach that recognizes that each person and community has different needs.

“DHS’ opioid settlement plan has been informed by Wisconsinites directly impacted by this epidemic,” said DHS Secretary-designee Karen Timberlake. “Through listening sessions, we heard feedback on our plan from nearly 600 Wisconsinites, including people living with an opioid use disorder, their families and friends, and providers. Today’s objection is blocking urgent relief our partners across the state need to help Wisconsinites suffering with opioid use disorder.”

DHS made its recommendations based on recommendations from the public, advocates, providers, first responders, and other partners whose experience cover the full spectrum of those impacted by the epidemic. In January, DHS held listening sessions around the state to hear from the public and stakeholders on what they see as the priorities for using these settlement funds. The report submitted to JFC was based on those recommendations. The DHS plan implements a phased approach corresponding with the payments Wisconsin expected to receive this year. The recommendations in the plan include:

- Making immediate investments in harm reduction;
- Increasing the availability of Narcan and fentanyl test strips around the state;
- Investing in new and updated treatment facilities;
- Enhancing data collection and surveillance;
- Providing funds for tribal nations to address the dramatic increase in opioid overdose deaths; and
- Establishing family support centers to provide information, education, and healthy coping skills while building resiliency for family and friends of people with substance use disorder.

The Evers Administration has been advancing a number of efforts to combat the opioid epidemic, such as the state’s new pilot [“Hub and Spoke”](#) model of care, as well as investing approximately [\\$47 million of American Rescue Plan Act](#)

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funding to increase community-level supports for people who have been grappling with mental health and substance use challenges. Additionally, last year, Wisconsin joined the [Bloomberg Opioids Overdose Prevention Initiative](#), which provided \$10 million to combat the opioid epidemic in Wisconsin over the next five years.