



Coping with a Participant's Death: When the Unthinkable Becomes Inevitable

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According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), there were approximately 107,622 drug overdose deaths in the United States in 2021. This represents a 15% increase over 2020 and is the largest ever number of drug overdoses in a 12-month period. Three out of every four of these deaths were due to opioids, with two-thirds of all overdose deaths due to synthetic opioids, mostly fentanyl¹.

¹https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2022/202205.htm

The CDC also reports a rise in overdose deaths from methamphetamine and cocaine from 2020 to 2021¹

Fentanyl, due to its easy availability and low cost relative to natural opioids, is increasingly used to adulterate all sorts of drugs, leading to unintended ingestion that can easily be fatal: “If you don’t have tolerance, two milligrams of fentanyl can kill you,” explains Dr. Nora Volkow, the director of NIDA²

¹https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2022/202205.htm

²Gary Baum and Evan Nicole Brown: Hollywood’s Sobering New Reality of Fentanyl Lacing: “Don’t Gamble If You Don’t Have a Stash From Pre-2020”. Hollywood Reporter, 12/01/21

DRUG TYPE (can be more than one drug type present upon post-mortem exam)	2021 DEATHS	2020 DEATHS
Synthetic Opioids (fentanyl)	71,238	57,834
Psychostimulants (methamphetamine)	32,856	24,576
Cocaine	24,538	19,927
Natural/semi-synthetic (prescription)	13,503	13,722

Drug overdose is now the leading cause of injury-related deaths in the United States, surpassing automobile accidents and firearm deaths and contributing to decreases in our life expectancy for the first time since World War I.

CDC Injury Center: Opioid Overdose Statistics

The five states with the highest age-adjusted drug overdose death rates (in parentheses) and total overdose deaths in 2021 were as follows:

1. West Virginia (90.9 per 100k): 1,501 deaths
2. Tennessee (56.6 per 100k): 3,813 deaths
3. Louisiana (55.9 per 100k): 2,463 deaths
4. Kentucky (55.6 per 100k): 2,381 deaths
5. Delaware (54 per 100k): 513 deaths

...

12. Georgia (23.5 per 100k): 2,500 deaths

https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/drug_poisoning_mortality/drug_poisoning.htm

While Georgia is 12th in terms of drug overdose deaths at 23.5.2 per 100k, it is 13th of all states and Washington, D.C. in terms of opioid prescription rate (53.9 prescriptions per 100 people; average of all states is 43.3 per 100). Thankfully these rates have been falling in recent years; these statistics from 2020, the most recent data available.

CDC Injury Center: Opioid Overdose Statistics

In 2020...

67% of GA drug overdose deaths involved opioids

While decreases were observed in both prescription opioid-involved deaths and those involving synthetic opioids other than methadone (mainly fentanyl and fentanyl analogs) through 2017, deaths involving heroin continued to rise through 2020 and then fell

CDC Wonder: [CDC WONDER](#)

County-level GA opioid overdose stats: [2020 GEORGIA COUNTY OPIOID OVERDOSE REPORT.PDF](#)

These reversals were short-lived, in that both opioid-involved and heroin-involved overdose ED visits/hospitalizations increased from late 2019 to early 2020

These trends echo national trends, and have been associated with the global pandemic

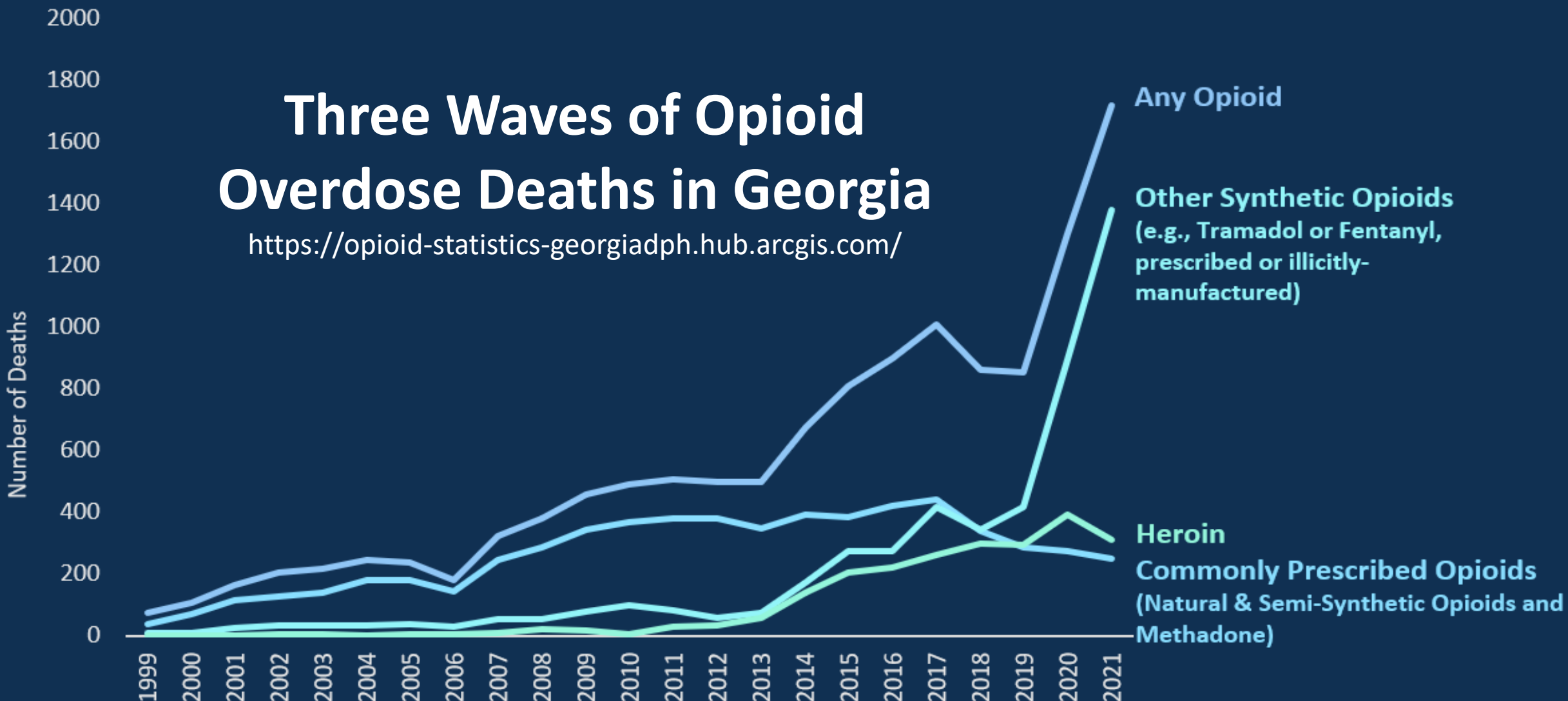
[HTTPS://DPH.GEORGIA.GOV/DRUG-SURVEILLANCE-UNIT](https://dph.georgia.gov/drug-surveillance-unit)

More than 40 states have reported increases in opioid-related overdose deaths during the pandemic, with increases recorded as being about 20% higher in March, 30% higher in April, and 40% higher in May of 2020 compared to the same months in 2019

Washington Post: Coronavirus has caused a huge spike in drug overdoses nationwide, July 1, 2020.

Three Waves of Opioid Overdose Deaths in Georgia

<https://opioid-statistics-georgiadph.hub.arcgis.com/>



Wave 1: Rise in Prescription Opioid Overdose Deaths

Wave 2: Rise in Heroin Overdose Deaths Started in 2011

Wave 3: Rise in Synthetic Opioid Overdose Deaths Started in 2013

SOURCE: Georgia Department of Public Health, Office of Health Indicators for Planning (OHIP)

Disruption of treatment services and recovery supports has left individuals increasingly isolated and removed critical coping systems and supports

One effect of opioids is to impart a sense of well-being and of being loved – two experiences lacking during the pandemic

Washington Post: Coronavirus has caused a huge spike in drug overdoses nationwide, July 1, 2020.

Interviews with drug users and treatment staff show that users typically experience multiple overdoses over the course of their substance misuse

A survey of 1,013 respondents conducted by the American Addiction Centers found that 54% of respondents know someone who died of a drug overdose; Rates were highest among millennials at just under 59%

Degrees of Separation: americanaddictioncenters.org

Witnessing and/or experiencing a drug overdose is associated with PTSD¹

Drug overdose is the leading cause of death following release from prison – 12.7 times higher than in the general population in the two weeks following release²

¹ Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

² ROAR – Reducing Overdose After Release - NIH

Those who abuse prescription opioids are relatively less informed than are injection drug users regarding overdose awareness, avoidance, and response strategies – despite having significant experience with overdoses and overdose fatalities

High risk and little knowledge: Overdose experiences and knowledge among young adult nonmedical prescription opioid users (NIH.gov)

The take-away message: Taken together, these alarming statistics all point to the inevitability that your court will experience at least one overdose fatality among your participants

Our responses therefore must be:

coordinated

comprehensive

collaborative

compassionate

Prevention Focused Public Health

Erie County (NY) Opiate Epidemic Task Force
– a comprehensive, community-wide collaborative employing a wide range of coordinated primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention services – a national model for reducing deaths

Opiate Epidemic Task Force | Erie County, NY Department of Health

These boxes are widely distributed around Erie County, placed adjacent to Automatic External Defibrillator (AED) boxes. They contain two doses of Narcan, nitrile gloves, a CPR breathing tube, instructions, and information on the county-wide initiative



Prevention Focused Public Health

Overdose recognition and response training¹

Overdose Education with Naloxone
Distribution (OEND)²

Increased availability of naloxone

¹D&A Communiques: How to Prevent a Death Due to Opioid Overdose.
Allegheny County

²Illinois Department of Human Services, among others

Learn How to Administer Naloxone

Video teaching administration of naloxone is available at:

[WATCH: HOW TO SAVE A LIFE WITH NALOXONE \(PA.GOV\)](#)

Georgia Resources

Georgia Council on Substance Abuse

(gasubstanceabuse.org)

Georgia Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Initiative

(stoprxabuseinga.org)

Georgia Overdose Prevention

(georgiaoverdoseprevention.org)

Video teaching administration of naloxone is available at:

[WATCH: HOW TO SAVE A LIFE WITH NALOXONE \(PA.GOV\)](http://PA.GOV)

Coping Following a Fatal Overdose

Very little relevant research exists; that which does suggests that the experience is similar to when a loved one commits suicide – the deaths are sudden, and carry both moral and social stigma

Understanding grief after an overdose death: umassmed.edu

Coping Following a Fatal Overdose

Three common questions asked by survivors:

Why did the person die of an overdose?

Was the death intentional?

Was the death preventable?

Coping Following a Fatal Overdose

As treatment court professionals and clinicians, we often feel that the death should have been avoidable, despite previous non-fatal overdoses and indications that up to 40% of friends and acquaintances were not surprised by the overdose of a friend or loved one

Degrees of Separation: americanaddictioncenters.org

Emotional Responses

shock

disbelief

sense of confusion

helplessness/hopelessness

guilt

shame

fear

failure

relief

guilt for feeling relief

self-blame

stigmatization

anger

abandonment

Other Factors

Younger, less experienced team members may be more at risk for adverse reactions

Dealing with the moral and social stigmatization, along with a sense that the team failed in its primary duty, are difficult barriers to surmount

Lessons from Those with Lived Experience

Court staff found themselves asking the three questions noted previously; experiencing self-blame, guilt, questioning the benefit of the court – followed by resolve and a commitment to address, rather than avoid, the topic of overdose – with participants, families, and the community.

Added process groups and increased relapse education and prevention with participants.

Lessons from Those with Lived Experience

Provide individualized treatment that involves the participants (one of the hallmarks of EBTs)

Work to eliminate the stigma around addiction and overdose

Rather than dwelling on what happened, direct energies towards making your court the best it can be and reducing overdoses

Recommendations

Recognize that participating in SUD treatment presents a potential paradox; while it can reduce or eliminate substance abuse, it can also reduce tolerance, which itself increases the risk for overdose

Recommendations

Review and selectively implement aspects of the excellent “Opioid Overdose Prevention and Related Trauma: Incorporating Overdose Prevention, Response, and Experience into Substance Use Disorder Treatment”

Available at:

[HTTP://PRESCRIBETOPREVENT.ORG/WP2015/WP-CONTENT/UPLOADS/INCORPORATING-OD-INTO-SUD-TX-12.141.PDF](http://prescribetoprevent.org/wp2015/wp-content/uploads/incorporating-od-into-sud-tx-12.141.pdf)

Recommendations

One of the authors of this work, Alice Bell (abell@ppppgh.org), is the Overdose Prevention Coordinator for Prevention Point Pittsburgh. While the authors recommend a holistic approach to incorporating overdose as a consistent topic of SUD treatment, even incorporating a few of their recommendations can be very helpful in addressing the issue.

Available at:

[INCORPORATING OPIOID INTO SUD TX GUIDE HEARTLAND ALLIANCE.PDF](#)
[\(MARYLAND.GOV\)](#)

Recommendations

The New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services has published “Overdose Prevention and Response in Behavioral Health Settings”, which is also a very comprehensive guide

Available at:

<https://oasas.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2020/09/overdose-prevention-and-response-bh-settings.pdf>

Recommendations

Develop a protocol of steps to take following an overdose fatality

In addition to providing trauma-informed services to clients, your team should practice trauma-informed care with each other

Recommendations

Utilize identified supports, including each other – this may take the form of a support or grief group, case consultation, and/or supervision

Seek individual support to minimize the trauma associated with the death

Be ready and willing to support colleagues and the participant's family members

Recommendations

Engage in a process of “meaning making” – searching for and finding meaning in the loss and grieving process, working to construct a healthy self-narrative

Recognize that grief is a process, and not a linear one – it involves periods of adjustment, recovery, and reorganization in what has been described as a “roller-coaster” type experience

Sources and Additional Resources

Opioid Misuse or Addiction: Need Help Now? Provides detailed information about what opioids are, how to recognize an overdose, and what to do to prevent or respond to an opioid overdose.¹

The Opioid Epidemic: The PA governor's office provides resources for all facing the opioid epidemic.²

¹ OPIOID MISUSE OR ADDICTION: NEED HELP NOW?

² THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Sources and Additional Resources

Materials from Prevention Point Pittsburgh

Prevent Overdose Deaths brochure¹

Prevent Overdose Deaths card²

GRASP – Grief Recovery After a Substance Passing:

www.grasphelp.org

HALO – Healing After a Loss to an Overdose (NJ)

¹ [PREVENT OVERDOSE DEATHS BROCHURE](#)

² [PREVENT OVERDOSE DEATHS CARD](#)

Sources and Additional Resources

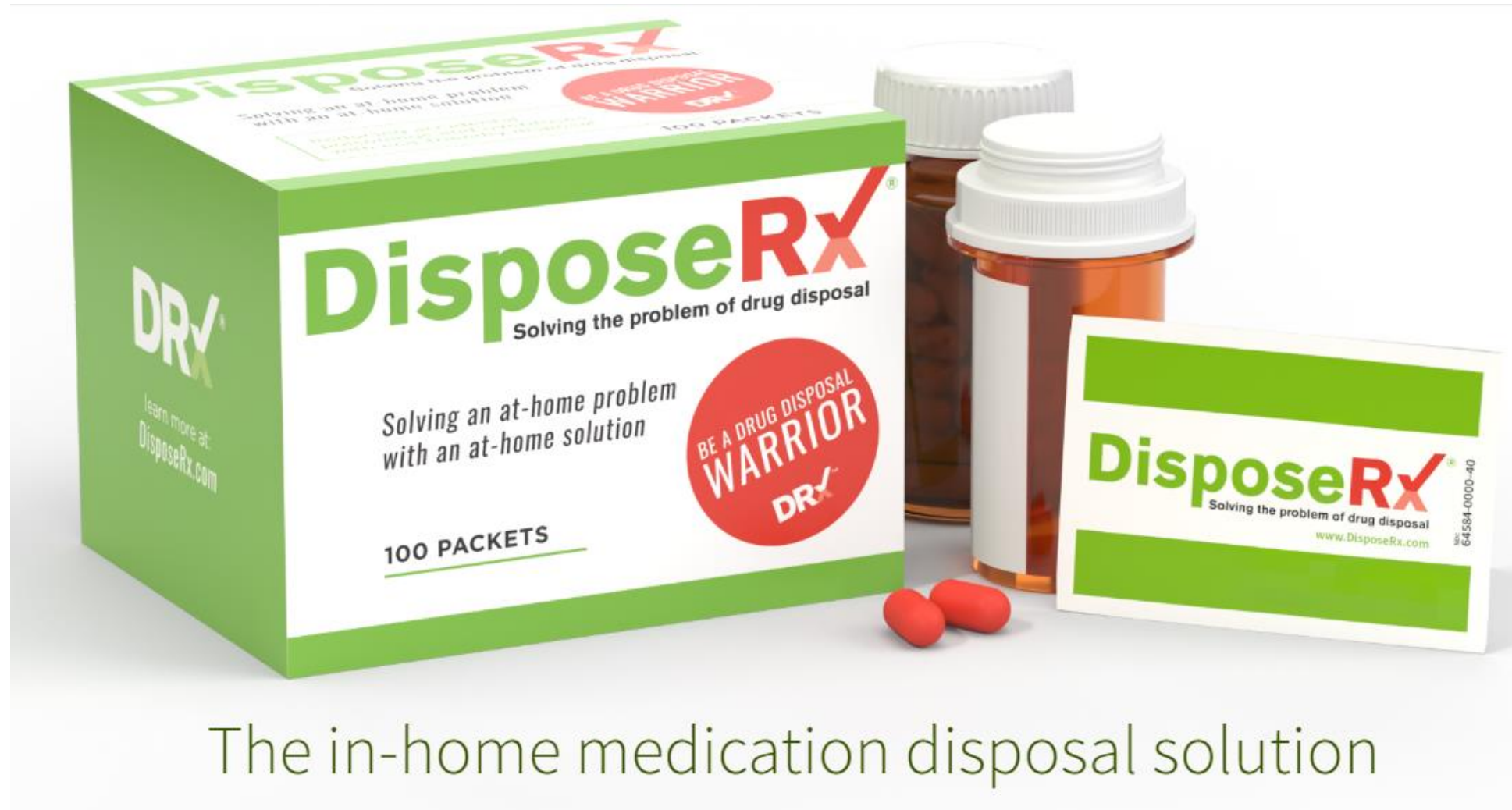
Supporting Providers After Drug Overdose Death¹

Center for Loss Brochure²

New GA Georgia Drug Overdose Data Dashboard:
<https://opioid-statistics-georgiadph.hub.arcgis.com/>

² SUPPORTING PROVIDERS AFTER DRUG OVERDOSE DEATH (NIH.GOV)

³ HELPING YOURSELF HEAL WHEN SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT DIES OF A DRUG OVERDOSE (CENTERFORLOSS.COM)



The in-home medication disposal solution

DisposeRx: <https://www.disposerx.com/>

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