Georgia ranked in top tier for action against opioid abuse

Georgia is one of 13 states receiving the highest mark from the National Safety Council for taking comprehensive actions to eliminate opioid overdoses and help protect residents.

The state rose from a “failing” designation in 2016 to “improving” in the new report on the opioid crisis, released this week in conjunction with National Rx Drug and Heroin Summit, held in Atlanta.

The summit featured addresses from former President Bill Clinton and from Kellyanne Conway, an adviser to President Trump who has been designated to lead the administration response to the opioid problem.

Opioids are a class of drugs that mimic the body’s natural response to pain by stimulating the body’s opioid receptors. Natural opioids, derived from the opium poppy, include drugs such as morphine. There are also semi-synthetic opioids, such as hydrocodone and oxycodone, and synthetic versions, including fentanyl.

The Safety Council report said more than 42,000 Americans lost their lives to an overdose involving opioids in 2016.

The drugs include highly addictive medications such as Vicodin, Percocet and OxyContin. These prescription opioids are a gateway drug to the street drug heroin, which is nearly identical chemically.
and actually may be cheaper and easier to get, the report said. Increasingly, heroin and other drugs are being combined with illicitly made fentanyl, which is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine.

The Safety Council identified six key actions that states can take to have a significant impact addressing the opioid epidemic:

** Mandating prescriber education

** Implementing opioid prescribing guidelines

** Integrating Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs into clinical settings

** Improving data collection and sharing

** Treating opioid overdose

** Increasing availability of opioid use disorder treatment

Georgia met five of the six measures, with data collection the only one it missed. Just two states, Nevada and New Mexico, fulfilled all six.

Other states earning an “improving” mark from the Safety Council were Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, Virginia and West Virginia, along with Washington, D.C.

The Georgia Department of Public Health said Wednesday that the state’s Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, an electronic database, can help eliminate duplicative prescribing and overprescribing of controlled substances. The program can provide a prescriber or pharmacist with information regarding a patient’s-controlled substance prescription history and protect patients at risk of abuse, the agency said.
Agency spokeswoman Nancy Nydam added that Public Health “is engaging state agencies, law enforcement and stakeholders throughout Georgia in the creation of a strategic plan to address the opioid crisis.”

A Kaiser Family Foundation analysis, citing CDC statistics, recently reported that Georgia had 918 overdose deaths from opioids in 2016, and 1,394 drug overdose deaths overall. But those death figures, as in other states, are probably underreported, experts say.

“The opioid crisis has affected one in four Americans and while some states are improving, others need to double down on actions that will save lives,” Deborah Hersman, president and CEO of the National Safety Council, said in a statement.

The report, citing studies, said 11 million Americans misused an opioid pain reliever in the past year, and that more than 2.1 million people suffer from an opioid use disorder. The authors noted that life expectancy in the United States declined for the second year in a row in 2016. Much of this decrease is linked to deaths from opioid overdoses.

On Wednesday, Conway told the summit audience of researchers, advocates, policymakers and law enforcement personnel that “we want to reduce the stigma and the silence that often attends opioid addiction,” according to a report by Atlanta’s CBS 46 (WGCL).

Conway said Trump is tackling the crisis on three fronts – calling for a disruption of the flow of illicit opioids into our country; better access to treatment programs; and a reduction in new prescriptions.

“So far nobody has said ‘no’ to us. The tech companies have been in, the professional sports leagues, corporate America,” Conway said, according to WGCL. “Different folks have come to find out how they can help.”
She also explained the president’s desire for stiffer penalties for drug traffickers.

“I know these are very politically charged times,” she said. “I can’t think of a more nonpartisan issue starving for bipartisan solutions than the opioid crisis and the drug demand, drug supply, the heroin epidemic that is really boiling our nation.”

Clinton addressed the summit Wednesday evening, speaking about how the crisis affects every community.

He said the crisis “creeps into every nook and cranny of our country,” and needs to be addressed as both a huge national problem and a community-by-community tragedy, according to the Louisville (Ky.) Courier-Journal.

Otherwise, Clinton said, “this can rob our country of the future.”

The former president said nearly every family is touched by the issue — including his. Not only does he have family members who have struggled with drug abuse, he said at least five close friends lost their children to overdoses.

“Nobody gets out of this for free,” Clinton said.

The National Institutes of Health announced at the summit Wednesday that it is launching a new program to speed scientific solutions to stem the national opioid crisis. r Francis Collins, the director of the NIH, said his agency plans to spend $1.1 billion this fiscal year on researching treatments for pain and opioid addiction. That figure includes an extra $600 million that Congress allotted the agency late last month.
And Thursday, U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams issued an advisory that encouraged more people to routinely carry naloxone, a drug that can reverse overdoses.

Police officers and EMTs often carry naloxone.

Gov. Nathan Deal in Georgia issued an order in 2016 that directed the Department of Public Health to issue a standing order to allow naloxone to be dispensed over-the-counter by pharmacists across the state.

The Georgia General Assembly permanently codified this rule last year.