

This is KPTZ 91.9FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Nigel O'Shea bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, May 13, 2026.

Over two decades ago, the opioid epidemic began in the United States. The impacts of highly addictive, overly prescribed drugs ricocheted to all corners of the nation, including Jefferson County, fracturing families, risking public health, burdening the economy, and straining the social fabric of the community. Service providers, court systems, health care, and law enforcement have all been straining under the weight of this epidemic. Since 2017, state attorneys general have been working to rectify the circumstances through legal action against opioid manufacturers, distributors, and pharmacies. Communities are now feeling the effects of their efforts, with settlement funds finally making it to places which have been deeply harmed.

On May 4, the Jefferson County Board of County Commissioners approved the Behavioral Health Advisory Committee's recommendation on how to distribute opioid settlement funds. In email correspondence with the *Beacon*, Mike Faulk, Deputy Communications Director of the Washington State Attorney General's Office, shared that the overall amount before attorney fees going to Jefferson County from the entirety of the opioid settlements is \$2,556,418. This will be paid out over the next five to 18 years.

The Board of County Commissioners designated the pharmaceuticals and manufacturing settlement funds through a request for funds proposal (RFP) to the Behavioral Health Advisory Committee. During the budget process last year, the board of Commissioners allocated \$150,000 to internal county functions, leaving \$200,000 to be distributed through the RFP.

The advisory committee reviewed 10 applications, and recommended funding four of them to the board of commissioners on May 4, with the largest amount of \$122,766 allocated for Jefferson County Public Health's Harm Reduction Program. \$57,200 is going to Believe in Recovery's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion Program, and \$14,034 going towards their Transport Program, and \$6,000 going to Jefferson County Public Health's Empowered Teens Coalition.

Public comment highlighted a lack of funding for treatment, especially from Discovery Behavioral Health's CEO Jim Novelli, who asked for \$162,342 in the initial grant process for a treatment program which was not selected to receive funds.

Most of the funds were instructed from the state to be used for treatment, but the committee felt the allocations to diversion programs, transportation, harm reduction, and teen empowerment align with the Washington Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The Behavioral Health Advisory Committee does however agree that emphasizing funding for treatment programs such as what Discovery Behavioral Health provides is essential for the next round of the pharmaceuticals and manufacturing RFPs. Due to the small size of Jefferson County's population, data for opioid use is more effectively reviewed through a regional perspective, and there has been a regional drop in opioid-related deaths since 2023.

Dr. Allison Berry, the Health Officer at both Jefferson and Clallam counties Public Health Departments, emphasized that most people who use these drugs are not homeless. Use is often driven by trauma, and isolation is a major risk factor for death. Having a support system dramatically increases survival and recovery rates. Dr. Berry also emphasized that the punishment perspective society takes towards drug use has been markedly unsuccessful, expensive, and increases overdose risk after release. A reduction in drug-related incarceration should be an important goal, in her opinion.

The RFP funding to Believe in Recovery and Jefferson County Public Health programs can support this approach and support pathways to recovery and treatment. Coordinated opioid response between firefighters, paramedics, law enforcement, and Public Health in Jefferson County is getting stronger. The web of providers working together is essential for community recovery.

Because, as Dr. Berry shared, opioid use is indicated to begin in a person's 20s, the Empowered Teens Coalition being funded this round is important for prevention work and social change. Dr. Berry reported that 70% of opioid users wish to stop. Contact with the Harm Reduction team, which is one of the organizations receiving settlement funds, and access to a needle exchange increases the likelihood that people using meth and fentanyl will go into recovery services.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and five Tuesday through Thursday partnering on Wednesday to bring you stories from the Jefferson County *Beacon*. This is Nigel O'Shea, thanks for listening.