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Health Department Releases Quarterly Drug Intoxication Report; Deaths Drop More Than One-Third In 2008

Baltimore, MD (July 1, 2009) – Mayor Sheila Dixon joined with Police Commissioner Frederick Bealefeld, Fire Chief Jim Clack, and Baltimore Substance Abuse Systems' Greg Warren to announce the release of the Health Department's quarterly report on intoxication deaths associated with drugs of abuse and alcohol. The report covers the fourth quarter of 2008 and includes totals for calendar year 2008.

Mayor Dixon celebrated the efforts of the Department, noting that they "have significantly increased access and capacity in publicly funded treatment centers for addicts across our City." Holding the quarterly report in her hand, she added, "One number stands out to me: 84. That's 84 fatal drug overdoses that didn't occur last year compared to the year before. In my book, that is 84 people whose lives were saved."

Highlights of the report include:

- There were 38 intoxication deaths associated with drugs of abuse or alcohol among Baltimore City residents in the fourth quarter of 2007, 27 fewer than in the same quarter in 2007.
- During the 2008 calendar year, there were 152 deaths from intoxication associated with drugs of abuse or alcohol among Baltimore residents, compared to 236 in 2007; 176 deaths resulting from intoxications occurred in Baltimore (regardless of residence), compared to 281 in 2007. This represents a 36% drop in resident deaths compared to 2007 and a 37% drop in deaths resulting from Baltimore intoxications. These are the lowest levels seen since 1995, the earliest year for which data are available.
- Deaths associated with all substances decreased in 2008 compared to 2007; however, decreases were most pronounced for cocaine-associated deaths, which saw a 48% decline.
- Heroin-associated and methadone-associated deaths decreased by 39-43% in 2008.

- Alcohol-associated deaths decreased the least (by 20-24%).
- As in past years, heroin remains the most common substance associated with intoxication deaths, with 59% of these deaths among residents in 2008 associated with heroin.

A variety of efforts are underway in the city that could be contributing to the decline in overdoses. These efforts include the expansion of substance abuse treatment with buprenorphine, increased access to drug treatment within the criminal justice system, communication with physicians on appropriate prescribing of opiates drugs, and efforts to educate intravenous drug users and their friends and family on how to avoid overdose. The extent to which these or other factors are responsible for the declines in intoxication deaths is not known.

“While it is extremely encouraging that intoxication deaths associated with drugs of abuse or alcohol were down more than a third in 2008 than 2007, we have much more work ahead to address this major public health problem,” said Interim Commissioner of Health Olivia D. Farrow. “Intoxication deaths associated with drugs of abuse or alcohol actually increased slightly in the most recent quarter. We are working with our private and public health allies to investigate and implement new, innovative strategies to reduce drug and alcohol-related deaths in Baltimore City.”

The Health Department’s Office of Epidemiology and Planning, under the leadership of Dr. Caroline Fichtenberg, authored the report using data from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of the State of Maryland.

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