

**For Immediate Release**

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**Washtenaw County Health Department: Community-wide Solutions Needed to Address Opioid Epidemic**  
*New “Healing Forest” report highlights themes from 48 conversations on the local opioid crisis*

YPSILANTI, Mich., Feb. 11, 2019 – Some epidemics, like Ebola, rush in like a tornado with immediate and obvious destruction. The opioid epidemic, instead, is more like fungus that slowly attacks trees, eventually decimating the forest. This is the focus of a newly [published report](#) by the Washtenaw County Health Department on the opioid epidemic that is affecting Washtenaw County and the entire country.

“Numbers can tell us how many people are overdosing,” says Adreanne Waller, epidemiologist at Washtenaw County Health Department, and author of the report. “But they can’t tell us why this crisis is so complex and deadly, or how to heal our community. This report goes far beyond opioid prescriptions and looks at underlying issues that create environments for addiction.”

Beginning in the early 2010s, the Washtenaw County Health Department, along with its substance abuse prevention partners, began to investigate an increase in opioid related deaths. Part of this investigation included examining traditional measures, such as hospitalizations, treatment, deaths, and arrests.

However, those who were able to tell the real stories that brought the numbers to life were those on the front lines of the epidemic. These people included people in recovery, in active addiction, and substance abuse treatment as well as medical, mental health and public health professionals, first responders and law enforcement officers, school psychologists, lawyers, researchers, governmental leaders, outreach workers, and housing providers. Themes and quotes from 48 conversations over the past seven years are laid out in the new report, titled “The Healing Forest.” The report is a special, qualitative data-focused, edition of Washtenaw County Health Department’s [Opioid Reports](#), which have been regularly published since 2014.

“The Healing Forest name and model derives from the Native American Wellbriety Movement,” says Waller. “It refers to the fact that we cannot take a sick tree, remove it from the sick forest, heal the tree and put it back in the sick forest. We need to heal the forest as well. We need to respond to this epidemic with a public health approach, not just by assuring access to naloxone and treatment, but by creating sustained community recovery.”

The conversations and report show that solutions to the epidemic must address our complex social environments. These environments are shaped by for-profit forces, such as alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical sales and the illicit drug trade. Changes in the health care system, provider practices, ongoing trauma, mental illness, and weakened social connections are also influential, as is limited access to healthy foods, physical activity, and safe neighborhoods.

Find an [executive summary](#) and the [Healing Forest report](#) on the Washtenaw County Health Department website.

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**Washtenaw County Health Department**

The Washtenaw County Health Department promotes health and works to prevent disease and injury in our community. Our mission is to assure, in partnership with the community, the conditions necessary for people to live healthy lives through prevention and protection programs.

The Washtenaw County Health Department has achieved national accreditation through the Public Health Accreditation Board. Visit us at [washtenaw.org/health](http://washtenaw.org/health) or call 734-544-6700.

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