

TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

Millions in opioid settlement money headed to Missoula over next decade

Griffen Smith
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Missoula's city and county governments will receive millions of dollars from nationwide opioid settlements over the next 18 years, but what that money will be spent on has yet to be determined.

The city and county will finalize an agreement next week that creates a local board to work with the state of Montana on allocating the money. Next year, Missoula will receive \$1.2 million, county Chief Administrative Officer Chris Lounsbury said.

Called the joint Opioid Remediation Board, the local group will be made up of Lounsbury, Mayor Andrea Davis, County Commissioner Dave Strohmaier, City Council President Amber Sherrill, Missoula Chief Administrative Office Dale Bickell, and County Chief Financial Officer Andrew Czorny.

The money comes from several national lawsuit settlements with opioid manufacturers and distributors. Some of the settlement groups include Albertsons pharmacy and Walmart.

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Additional lawsuits are in the settlement process, which will continue to provide money to communities across the country for the next 10 to 18 years. After the upfront \$1.2 million comes in, approximately \$700,000 will be given to the city and county each year for the next 10 years.

After 10 years, the amount allocated might be smaller for the remaining eight years, Lounsbury said.

The county approved the agreement to form the local board on Thursday, and the city will approve the board during its Monday night meeting on Aug. 12.

During a presentation Wednesday, Bickell said the money will likely flow to ongoing projects. Lounsbury said it could be used to help solve issues that stem from substance abuse.

"For example it can be spent on alcohol and drug testing related to opioids for a treatment court program that's going to divert people from the criminal justice system, or around housing that might help folks struggling with addiction issues," Lounsbury said.

The city has spent previous opioid settlement money on the city's Mobile Support Team and the Johnson Street Emergency Shelter, Bickell said.

The state **Montana Opioid Abatement Trust** will work with the local joint board to allocate the money.

"There's a lot of process," Lounsbury said.

Missoula County saw 22 drug overdose deaths in 2022, with all of the opioid-related deaths coming from fentanyl, according to the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.

DPHHS reported that from 2012-2017, there were roughly 87 opioid prescriptions written per 100 residents in the state. That study also found that opioid deaths in Montana occur less than the national average.

Lounsbury expects to have the money available by the end of the calendar year. City Council President Amber Sherrill said she wished more funding could come to help with opioid issues.

"As we see this crisis in our country, this is just not enough money," Sherrill said. "I don't know if there could be enough money for the lives that this has ruined, but we are happy to get any money, and we are going to take it and we are going to use it wisely."

Griffen Smith is the local government reporter for the Missoulian.

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