Between 1999 and 2016, more than 630,000 people died from a drug overdose in the United States. The current epidemic of drug overdoses began in the 1990s with overdose deaths involving prescription opioids, driven by dramatic increases in prescribing opioids for chronic pain. In 2010, rapid increases in overdose deaths involving heroin marked the second wave of opioid overdose deaths, and a third wave began in 2013, when overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids, particularly those involving illicitly manufactured fentanyl, began to increase significantly. [Source: 2018 Annual Surveillance Report of Drug-Related Risks and Outcomes; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.]

This course is intended to provide an awareness and greater understanding of the scope of the opioid crisis and fundamental information that will help enable funeral directors provide compassionate care to survivors – the families they serve.

The information contained in this course is not intended to provide medical, psychiatrist or legal advice. It is merely to help educate funeral professionals on opioid addiction and how they can play a role in alleviating the suffering that opioid addiction has caused millions of people.
Opioid vs. Opiate vs. Narcotic

- The term opiates refers to natural or slightly modified components of opium such as codeine, morphine, and heroin.

- The term opioids was originally used for synthetic opiates such as Oxycontin and Fentanyl, but now is used for the entire class of drugs.

- Narcotics is an older name originally referring to any mind-altering compound with sleep-inducing properties.
Increased Death Rates

After a century of decreasing death rates in North America, the overall death rate began to increase largely because of deaths caused by drug overdoses and alcohol abuse.

More than 175 Americans are dying a day due to drug overdoses and, if this epidemic continues unchecked, it could claim one million lives by 2020. (USA Today 1/29/18)

In 2016, the New York Times reported that more people under the age of 50 died from drug-related causes than cancer, war, and traffic accidents.

Source: OGR Opioid Epidemic: How Funeral Directors Can Respond (March 9, 2017)
Opioid Addiction

People who are addicted to opioid painkillers are 40 times more likely to become addicted to heroin.

In the U.S., deaths from prescription opioids have more than quadrupled since 1999.
Opioid addiction affects all people regardless of age, gender, religion, geography or ethnic background and death rates in general are increasing rapidly in nearly every demographic segment. In fact, 42% of opioid overdose deaths in the U.S. were among those ages 45 and over.
Many health experts say that opioid addiction differs from other addictions because it is considered to be a disease.

Opioid addiction is a chronic medical condition. Breaking an opioid addiction on one’s own without professional treatment is highly unlikely.

Opioids alter the brain so it requires an ever-increasing dosage to curb pain.
Prescription Opioids

Prescription opioids include:

- Oxycodone (OxyContin®, Percocet®)
- Hydrocodone (Vicodin®)
- Morphine (Kadian®, Avinza®)
- Codeine
- Methadone
- Fentanyl

Opioids are a group of drugs that are used for treating pain. They are derived from opium which comes from the poppy plant.
Misusing Prescription Drugs

How do people misuse prescription opioids?

• Taking the medicine in a way or dose other than prescribed.
• Taking someone else’s prescription medicine.
• Taking the medicine for the effect it causes – to get high.

Opioids bind to and activate opioid receptors on cells located in many areas of the brain, spinal cord, and other organs in the body, especially those involved in feelings of pain and pleasure. When opioids attach to these receptors, they block pain signals sent from the brain to the body and release large amounts of dopamine throughout the body. This release can strongly reinforce the act of taking the drug, making the user want to repeat the experience. [Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse - www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/prescription-opioids]
High Risk Users

Older people are at high risk for overdoses because they are more likely to seek solutions for serious pain.
Opiate Residue, the Size of One Grain of Salt, Can Kill

Opiate residue can remain on the skin or personal belongings of someone who died from an overdose. Although rare, opiate residue can cause an overdose in an unsuspecting person.

We’re talking about such trace amounts that are literally the size of one grain of salt can kill.

–Chuck McPhilamy, police officer, Marietta, GA
The “Opioid Overdose Triad”

There are three key symptoms referred to as the “opioid overdose triad”:

- Pinpoint pupils
- Slowed or stopped breathing
- Unconsciousness/non-responsiveness

Other symptoms include:
- Limp body
- Pale face
- Clammy skin
- Purple or blue color to lips and fingernails
- Vomiting
- Choking
- Emitting gurgling sounds or snoring
Opioid Overdose Treatment

Naloxone* is a medication approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat opioid overdose. It works by blocking opioid receptor sites, which reverses the toxic effects of the overdose. Naloxone can be administered as a nasal spray (Narcan) into the muscle, under the skin, or via intravenous injection.

* This antidote can save a life, but it should not be seen as a replacement for professional medical treatment.
Experiencing Grief After the Loss of a Loved One Who Dies From Opioid Overdose

Families whose loved ones die from opioid overdoses may experience more complicated forms of grief than funeral professional normally witness. They may feel the following:

• **Fear**, or distress about being alone or experiencing another overdose death.
• **Helplessness**, or being uncertain about who to tell or where to get help.
• **Sadness**, or experiencing a desire to withdraw from others.
• **Longing**, or feeling intense longing for the loved one, as well as intense longing to talk about the person.
• **Guilt**, or feeling guilt about not saying certain things or doing certain things.
• **Despair**, or feeling detached from life and not caring about anything or anyone.
• **Anger**, or feeling angry at others who lead normal lives and angry about the death.
• **Numbness**, or feeling separated from events going on in life.
What Is Different About This Grief?

• There is little academic research on the subject – death from overdose occurs outside hospital rooms, at home, in friends’ houses, on couches, in bedrooms, in bathtubs, on pavements, in hotels and even in the street. These are not places where research normally takes place.
• There is still a stigma attached to addiction – that the person who died was not strong enough or good enough to stop abusing drugs. Also, unintentional injuries, homicides and other indirectly related incidents can occur from drug use.
• For families and loved ones, the stigma transcends to “I did not do enough” or “I’m a failure for letting this happen.” Shame, prejudice and isolation are common emotions.
• Funeral directors are often the ones who must help guide families of overdose that are compounded by stigma.
Use Universal Precautions in the Prep Room

To minimize risk to the funeral home staff, anyone who has direct contact with a deceased drug user should maintain high standards of personal hygiene and follow universal precautions including but not limited to:

✓ Overalls and full length gown
✓ Double layer nitrile gloves (not latex)
✓ Plastic sleeve covers
✓ Rubber non-slip and chemical proof boots
✓ Waterproof apron, long enough to overlap boots
✓ Face masks or visors
Potential Safety Hazards

When a funeral home arranges funeral or memorial services for someone who died from an opioid overdose, staff must be alert for several potential safety hazards.

- Deaths of young people often draw large crowds, and crowd control may be a situation for staff to direct and control.
- Regardless of a person’s demographic profile, someone who dies from an overdose may have been part of a drug culture, and some funeral guests may be from the culture and display erratic or unusual behavior.
- Some funeral guests may use alcohol or drugs at the funeral home.
- A funeral guest may overdose while attending a funeral.
- Law enforcement authorities may arrive on-site to monitor or arrest someone known to sell opioids or other drugs.
- Members of the community may criticize the funeral home for serving an overdose victim due to existing stigma.
Maintain a Safe Funeral Home Environment

- Educate staff to understand the dynamics of opioid addiction and how to recognize symptoms.
- Educate staff on the wide range of emotions families experience when grieving the loss of loved ones to drug overdoses.
- Include this topic in staff meetings to generate ideas on spotting and responding to guests’ unusual behaviors at funeral and memorial services.
- Have a health expert train staff to administer NARCAN® Nasal Spray to guests who overdose while on funeral home property.
  - NARCAN® is a prescription medicine used for the treatment of an opioid emergency, and if administered on time, it can stop the effects of heroin and pull a person out of an overdose situation.
- Educate embalmers on potential hazards of opiate residue and insist they use universal precautions. Stock NARCAN® near preparation rooms in case exposure triggers an overdose.
Maintain a Safe Funeral Home Environment

All staff members should be familiar with guidelines the funeral home sets to deal with guests’ behavioral issues if they become threatening to the safety of other guests and staff.
Get Advice from First Responders

One of the best ways to prepare for safety, health, or security issues at the funeral home is to obtain advice from those who have expertise with these types of cases:

- Establish contact with local law enforcement officials
- Establish contact with local health responders
- Share your procedures with local officials
- Determine who you should contact if problems arise related to an opioid overdose
Educate Families About Grief

Most people have little knowledge about grief. Consider these ways to help educate families about grief:

• Educate families about the realities of their grief in the arrangement conference. Let them know that acknowledging grief is an important way to cope with their loss.
• Inform them of the possibility of complicated grief and encourage them to see a counselor if they continue to experience extreme emotions.
• Create a community presentation to help people understand that opioid addiction is a chronic disease that requires professional treatment.
• Post information about opioid addiction on the funeral home’s website along with resources for help.
• Display brochures at the funeral home that talk about the complicated emotions many families who lose loved ones to drug overdose experience and steps they can take to cope with their grief.
Thank You for taking our course!

Here are some resources that may be helpful regarding this topic:

- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention – [www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose](http://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose)
- U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services - [www.hhs.gov/opioids](http://www.hhs.gov/opioids)
- Govt. of Canada (search for opioids) - [www.canada.ca](http://www.canada.ca)
- Resources for Parents - [www.episcenter.psu.edu/OpioidResourcesParents](http://www.episcenter.psu.edu/OpioidResourcesParents)
- Grief Website – [www.whatsyourgrief.com](http://www.whatsyourgrief.com)
- Bereaved Parents of the USA – [www.bereavedparentsusa.org](http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org)
- Grief Recovery after a Substance Passing – [www.grasphelp.org](http://www.grasphelp.org)
- Broken No More Support Forum – [www.broken-no-more.org](http://www.broken-no-more.org)
- Narcotics Anonymous Family Groups – [www.nar-anon.org](http://www.nar-anon.org)
Course Sources:

- With 175 Americans Dying a Day, What are the Solutions to the Opioid Epidemic? USA Today Network, Jerry Mitchell, the Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, MS); 1/29/18
- 2018 Annual Surveillance Report of Drug-Related Risks and Outcomes – United States; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control; 8/31/18
- Prescription Opioids; National Institute on Drug Abuse; June 2018 (online)
- Five Fast Facts on the U.S. Opioid Addiction Crisis; U.S. News; Megan Trimble, Associate Editor, Social Media; 10/26/17
- Five Scary Facts You Didn’t Know About Prescription Opioid Painkillers; Lauren Villa, MPH; online 7/23/18
- Opioid Overdose Signs & Symptoms; www.towardtheheart.com, online
- Opioids: Addiction, Withdrawal and Recovery; Addictions and Recovery Information for Individuals, Families and Professionals; www.addictionsandrecovery.org
- Opioid Deaths and Family Grief, Thrive Global, www.thriveglobal.com