



Attacking opioids byte by byte

By Rob Cosinuke | June 1, 2016



Like many states, Massachusetts is struggling with an opioid crisis – and state government is taking action. In March, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker signed a

comprehensive bill addressing education, prevention, intervention, and recovery. Baker recently sat down with athenaInsight to talk about leadership, data, and innovative ways tackle a public health emergency. His thoughts are condensed and edited here.

On becoming aware of the crisis:

My wife campaigned quite a bit at night and on weekends during the campaign, and she and I would get together after we'd been out going somewhere and say, "What were people talking about?" And this opioid thing just came up over and over and over.

The stories people would tell you would break your heart because they all had a very similar pattern. Somebody got injured or tried something at a party. It was usually a pain med of some kind and they eventually found their way into addiction. The

addiction eventually became the only thing that was important to them and you know, they bounced in and out of treatment. Their families were trying desperately to figure out how to help them get off it. Trust disappears because this person just starts lying and doing whatever they can to get their next hit. And many of these stories ended with somebody dying.

You hear enough of these and you realize that there's something bigger going on here. And so one of the things we did – to make sure it wasn't just us happening to land in front of every family in Massachusetts that had a story about this – was we started to collect a lot of data. And there was a ton of data. Opioid overdose deaths have been going up at a rate of about 25% per year for ten years. The number of prescriptions that have been written has been going up by the same amount. Overdoses and near deaths have been going up by the same amount. The data's all there, but somebody needed to go find it and put it together.

Once you have the stories and, the data, then the question becomes, "What do you do about it?" We put together a coalition of really smart people. Said: In 60 days, we want a report. They gave us a report on 65 recommendations and we're just working

our way through them. Some of them we can do administratively. Some of them we've got to go to the legislature for. They're all built around prevention education, mostly for parents and kids and providers and coaches; intervention, which is about law enforcement and dealing with some of the dealers and traffickers; treatment and recovery.

You take all these stories you're hearing. Try and figure out if the data supports the notion that it's as widespread as it seems to be. Get some smart people to help you figure out how to build a case around what to do about it – and then [clap, clap] do it.

On the transformative power of data:

Go back a decade, most people were making decisions in health care based on their own experience because that was the data they had, that was available to them. But the digitization of information has put people in a position where for the first time, going forward, they'll be able to make decisions not just on their own experience but the experience of a lot of other people. When you raise and increase the size of the samples here, people will learn things. And they'll get smarter about the decisions they make.

On the role of government:

I want the government to be smart and strategic about the way it deals with regulation. There's a lot of "administrivia" in health care. But I also think we have a lot of information. State government especially collects a ton of information. Most of it's been collected historically for regulatory purposes. People weren't thinking about it as a way to collect information that you could then organize and share back to the community. I fully expect that over the course of the next few years, we'll be putting a lot of that information we collect into some sort of a format where people can use it, putting it back into the community to help enhance the ability of caregivers to make good decisions.

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