



## **NEWS RELEASE**

### **ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH**

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## **Alabama's Prescription Drug Monitoring Program documents high use of prescription painkillers, as drug overdose deaths are an urgent concern**

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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Blount County Coroner John Mark Vaughn has witnessed the results of prescription drug abuse far too many times in his career, and he urges awareness of its dangers. In a review of fatalities in his county, drug overdoses accounted for an alarming number of deaths.

"This problem is completely out of control," Vaughn said. "We've got to do something to stop our citizens from partaking of the 'Blount County cocktail,' a mixture of prescribed drugs such as methadone and Xanax." Vaughn added that he is even more concerned about prescription drug abuse than with use of illegal drugs such as methamphetamines and crack cocaine because of the higher death rates associated with prescription drugs.

Prescription drug abuse occurs not only in small rural counties; it exists throughout the state. The Alabama Department of Public Health joins Vaughn and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in warning the public about the deadly epidemic of prescription painkiller abuse and the rise in drug-related injuries and deaths.

According to the CDC, in 2008, most of the deaths in the U.S. that were due to drug overdoses were caused by prescription drugs. Also according to the CDC, Alabama's rate of prescription painkillers sold per 10,000 people in 2010 was among the highest in the nation. Persons who misuse pain relievers often get them from a friend or relative, sometimes without the knowledge of the person for whom the medication was prescribed.

In the years 2008-2010 in Alabama, 8 percent of deaths in 18- to 25-year-olds and 9 percent of deaths in 26- to 44-year-olds were attributed to unintentional poisoning by certain drugs or biological substances.

Alabama has had the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program in place to monitor prescription drug abuse since April 2006. Goals of the program, which is managed through the Pharmacy Division of the Alabama Department of Public Health, are as follows:

- Provide information for medical practitioners and pharmacists regarding the controlled substance use of their patients.
- Reduce prescription drug abuse by providers and patients.

- Reduce time and effort to explore leads and assess the merits of possible drug diversion legal proceedings.
- Educate medical practitioners, pharmacists, policy makers, law enforcement and the public regarding the diversion, abuse and misuse of controlled substances.

“In 2011 we identified individuals going to more than six medical practitioners’ offices and six pharmacies for controlled substances. Our program notifies each medical practitioner and pharmacy about the individuals each month,” Charles Thomas, division director, said. “Our records provide information on those who shop around for medications. Acquiring drugs under false pretenses is illegal.”

In 2007 in Alabama, according to U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration estimates, 35,000 adolescents age 12 to 17 used prescription pain relievers for nonmedical reasons and 193,000 residents age 18 and older reported nonmedical prescription pain reliever use.

Dr. Donald Williamson, state health officer, said powerful prescription pain and anxiety drugs are used more frequently and in greater quantities than in the past, so monitoring them is increasingly important. “Medical practitioners, pharmacists, patients and families need to be vigilant against the misuse of prescription drugs,” Williamson said.

He added, “The person who struggles with drug dependence or addiction needs care and support. This program is a tool that can help prevent prescription drug abuse.”

For more information about Alabama’s Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, visit [adph.org/pdmp/](http://adph.org/pdmp/). Also, the CDC offers information about prescription painkiller overdoses and preventive measures at <http://www.cdc.gov/VitalSigns/PainkillerOverdoses/index.html#Risk>