

## Governor candidate says he'd cut Idaho's opioid deaths in half

Working as an emergency room doctor for more than 18 years, Tommy Ahlquist says he saw first-hand the “devastating effects” of opioid overdoses and deaths.

But traveling around the state this year while campaigning for governor, Ahlquist said his conversations with police, first responders and health care professionals were “very eyeopening for me.”

Monday, the Republican candidate released an “action plan” and a video on addressing Idaho’s opioid crisis. While this state hasn’t seen problems to the extent of some areas back East, Idaho currently averages about 200 opioid deaths annually.

The issue is not something only happening in other states, nor is it just an urban problem, he said. “This is a statewide problem. It is everywhere.”

Idaho has focused much of its drug-prevention resources on methamphetamine, but it needs to “get in front of” the opioid crisis quickly, Ahlquist said.

Opioids and heroin are becoming “a bigger problem than methamphetamine because with methamphetamine the chances of overdose are different,” he said.

The risk of overdose with opioids — particularly variations like fentanyl — is much higher and the effects much more sudden, he said. “With opioids and heroin, if you get too much you stop breathing and you die. It is a bigger problem in the fact that it is more serious for the morbidity and the mortality of the problem.”

Additionally, Ahlquist said Idaho needs to take a different approach to battling drug addiction.

“We need to figure out in Idaho that one dollar invested in the front end on mental health care saves us hundreds of dollars on the back end,” he said. “We have to get down into our communities and get some preventive care in mental health which will help across the board, especially in opioid addiction and overdose.”

Ahlquist, who more recently is known for his work in Boise as a developer, is one of a number of Republicans seeking the nomination to pursue the governor’s seat in May. His primary competitors are U.S. Rep. Raul Labrador and Lt.Gov. Brad Little.

If elected, Ahlquist said, he intends to reduce the number of opioid-related deaths in Idaho by 50 percent in four years by:

- Declaring a state of emergency on opioid overdoses and deaths — as Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts have already done.

- Use the role of governor to raise public awareness about opioids, and teach families and individuals how they can get help and help others
- Create some sort of group dedicated to the issue including state and local first responders, medical professionals, pharmacies, primary and secondary education leaders, community leaders and churches. He said it would not be a task force, and he would personally assemble the group to find and coordinate solutions.
- Make sure police and other first responders have all necessary training and equipment.
- Make “smart investments” in substance abuse clinics.
- Improve a range of factors including state data collection; the availability of the drug naloxone, used to halt overdoses; and access to chronic pain therapies that do not depend on opioids.
- Review any state mental health programs — including for suicide prevention — to look for improvements related to opioid issues.

All this work will take some time, Ahlquist said. Given the growing problems nationwide — President Donald Trump declared a national public health emergency over opioids last month — Ahlquist said the state must act quickly.

“We cannot wait around for a two-year study on where we are going to put resources,” he said.

Ahlquist said one of the first things he would do to implement on-the-ground changes is go to Idaho’s law enforcement agencies and first responders.

“They are in the trenches battling this every day,” he said. “I would ask them, ‘What do you need right now to be effective?’ ”

For example, Ahlquist said, first responders quickly need a plan for the use of naloxone, which is highly effective and readily available, but has an expiration date.

“We need a statewide plan on how to acquire it, how to keep it and how to help the local jurisdictions with the use of the drug because it does have a shelf life.”

In 2015, Idaho’s opioid overdose rate was 14.2 deaths per 100,000 residents, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study.

The states with the highest rates of death due to opioid overdose were West Virginia (41.5 per 100,000), New Hampshire (34.3 per 100,000), Kentucky (29.9 per 100,000), Ohio (29.9 per 100,000), and Rhode Island (28.2 per 100,000).

While Idaho’s death rate is lower, “one death is too many,” Ahlquist said.

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“We are talking deaths here,” he said. “We are talking about completely treatable and reversible causes of death that affects families from all sort of socioeconomic backgrounds. This is something that we can fix. It is something we can get after with education, awareness and treatment. Let’s not wait until we become top 2, top 3. Let’s do something now.”

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