

# **Suffolk County Executive Bellone Unveils Prescription Drug Education Initiative**

## **Provides information to medical practitioners to reduce prescriptions for opioids**

**(Hauppauge, NY, March 1, 2012)** – Seeking to break the grip of opiate drug addiction among a growing number of Suffolk County residents, Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone and Commissioner of Health Services James Tomarken, MD, MPH, MBA, MSW, have unveiled an initiative to arm prescribers with evidence-based material to serve as a reference and guide when prescribing pain management therapy.

“Prescription drug abuse is a public health crisis that must be tackled from multiple levels,” said Bellone. “By engaging the medical community on reducing opioid prescriptions, we will reduce the burden on the law enforcement community.”

The manuscript entitled “Preventing Misuse of Prescription Opioid Drugs” will be disseminated to 8,800 doctors, dentists, physician assistants and nurse practitioners who prescribe medication in Suffolk County.

The document, amended from an article published in City Health Information in 2011 for use in Suffolk County, outlines the problem of opioid misuse. It provides information on specific drugs that were named in the cause of death in Suffolk County from 2004 through 2011 and outlines the health risks associated with prescription opioids. Prescribers will find useful information on non-opioid approaches to managing pain, an Opioid Risk Tool, considerations for dosing and monitoring, suggestions on communicating with patients about pain medications, tips for recognizing signs of prescription drug misuse, and resources for assessment, monitoring and treatment.

This initiative follows pharmacy robberies and deadly shootings by opioid-addicted criminals last year on Long Island. The rise in opioid-related crime puts prescribers under greater pressure from law enforcement, leaving many concerned that they will be legally accountable if they fail to identify potential drug abusers who later commit a crime.

“The health problems associated with opioid drugs have been evident in Suffolk County where increases in medical emergencies, overdose deaths, and drug-related crimes have heightened concern,” said Commissioner James Tomarken.

The Suffolk County Department of Health will provide additional resources to prescribers. The Department of Health Services’ Division of Community Mental Hygiene Services has made a senior staff member available to prescribers for consultation and referral each business day from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Provider education is one component of Bellone’s multifaceted approach in combating the misuse of opioid medications in Suffolk County. In an associated effort, the Department of

Health Services is coordinating with New York State in promoting the SBIRT (Screening, Brief Intervention, Referral and Treatment) initiative to emergency and primary health care providers. The Suffolk County Police Department has also been working on enhanced programs to protect pharmacies, help people safely dispose of prescription drugs and spot signs of abuse.

“I would like to commend Suffolk County Department of Health for this initiative,” said Patrick O’Shaughnessy, Chief Medical Officer at St. Catherine of Siena Medical Center in Smithtown and member of Suffolk County’s Heroin and Opiate Advisory Panel. “As physicians, we need to do our part to continue to manage pain effectively, yet be cognizant of the high potential for addiction with these medications. As a result of this work, we will take these recommendations out to our medical leaders, as well as front line clinicians, in the hopes of providing alternative pain management options and services.”

Along with offering counsel to providers, Suffolk County provides education about the dangers of opioid misuse to our youth through the *HealthSmart* Program and also encourages residents to take advantage of “Operation Medicine Cabinet,” which allows them to drop off any unused medications at their local police precincts.