

July 27, 2018

Jeffrey Meyers
Commissioner
Department of Health and Human Services
129 Pleasant Street
Concord NH 03301

Via Email Only: SOR@dhhs.nh.gov

Re: N.H. Department of Health and Human Services Proposal to the State Opioid Response Grant program

Dear Commissioner Meyers,

New Futures appreciates the opportunity to offer the following recommendations for the N.H. Department of Health and Human Services' proposal to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) for the State Opioid Response (SOR) Grant program. New Futures is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that advocates, educates and collaborates to improve the health and wellness of all New Hampshire residents. New Futures envisions a state where public policies support timely access to quality and affordable healthcare for all who call the Granite State home.

As you know, New Hampshire is experiencing a devastating addiction epidemic that continues to take hundreds of lives each year. Though we are concerned that the severe restrictions placed on the SOR funding, specific to opioid use disorder (OUD), will limit its impact to address all substance use disorders, and will create reporting challenges for treatment providers, New Futures believes these funds could play an important role in supporting the systems, programs and infrastructure needed to overcome this public health crisis and to prevent the next one.

Specifically, New Futures believes this funding could help to support and enhance programs funded in recent years through the federal Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act and the 21st Century Cures Act, both of 2016. Together, these grant funds have helped develop a range of programs and services for individuals and families impacted by the opioid epidemic. The contracts awarded to Granite Pathways and the Gorham Family Resource Center have funded preventative services for families impacted by substance misuse; funding to Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical System has gone to support Medication Assisted Treatment for pregnant mothers; and the contract with the N.H. Department of Corrections has covered care coordination and naloxone for individuals leaving incarceration. These evidence-based programs are making in-roads in New Hampshire's prevention, treatment and recovery efforts, and further investments through the SOR grant funds would help them to broaden their reach and deepen their impact across our state.

Further, the SOR funds could play an important role helping to develop a housing stock to better support and meet the needs of those in long-term recovery from opioid addiction. As you know, recovery housing is in short supply across our state, especially in rural areas, and expanding these housing resources will be essential to overcoming the opioid epidemic.

Though the SOR funds cannot go toward bricks and mortar, they can help to develop the partnerships and the plans necessary to expand recovery housing and to provide those coming out of treatment with the support and stability they need to maintain their long-term recovery.

Among other critical resources, the SOR funds could help further develop Medication-Assisted Treatment programs across our state by helping to reduce costs and develop MAT programs in emergency rooms, rural health clinics and other settings. For many providers, the cost of medications and the demands of MAT certification are prohibitive and contribute to a severe service shortage. These SOR funds could help overcome these barriers by supplying stipends, scholarships, additional staffing or other incentives to providers pursuing certification. In addition, this funding could go far to help advance telehealth strategies and opportunities. Many of our state's leading healthcare organizations are committed to increasing access to treatment in our underserved and rural areas, and this funding could help to enhance those partnerships and expand services.

Beyond these specific programs, New Futures encourages you to keep certain populations in mind when determining the best use for these SOR funds, specifically young children and families. As the addiction crisis continues, we know the number of children impacted by substance misuse has grown exponentially. Between 2005-2015, the number of babies born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) increased fivefold over the 10-year period between 2005-2015¹, and we fear those numbers have continued to rise in the years since.

To the extent possible, it's critical that we direct resources and support to address unmet needs facing pregnant women who are struggling with addiction, babies born with NAS and other withdrawal symptoms, and young children and families impacted by the opioid epidemic. Strategies like Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT), and early intervention approaches can shape developmental trajectories by piling on protective factors and minimizing risk factors even for our most vulnerable children. Programs like evidence-based home visiting, high-quality child care, preschool and Head Start, and family services served through family resource centers can help promote the development of cognitive and social skills which are protective factors against later substance use. These programs teach children to manage their own emotions and cope with adversity, and can help parents and other caregivers develop the skills to be supportive in ways that steer children away from substance use.

Lastly, as New Hampshire's Medicaid expansion program shifts to the Managed Care Organizations, we know that substance misuse treatment providers are facing a significant drop in reimbursement rates. Recognizing that the SOR funding cannot be used to address the rate issue, we urge DHHS to be innovative in its use of the grant funds to help relieve the anticipated shortfalls. It's essential that we support our providers and maintain and grow our treatment services if we are to overcome this tragic opioid epidemic.

In these areas, and many others, we believe the SOR funding could make a significant difference in the lives of individuals and families as we work to overcome the opioid crisis. At New Futures, we look forward to working with you and all our state and federal partners to help maximize the impact of these funds, to increase access to treatment services, to erase the stigma surrounding addiction, and to bringing this epidemic to an end. Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

¹ University of New Hampshire Carsey School of Public Policy (2017). *As Opioid Use Climbs, Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome Rises in New Hampshire*. <https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/opioid-nas-nh>

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jake Berry', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jake Berry, Vice President of Policy, New Futures