

Bill would require testing sewage for data on drugs

By Catherine Ho

For years, state and local health officials have watched in dismay as drug overdoses spiraled ever higher. Now they could gain a new tool to track the extent of the crisis.

If proposed legislation from Assembly Member Matt Haney, D-San Francisco, is successful, California could become the first state to mandate routine testing of wastewater treatment plants statewide for fentanyl, methamphetamine and other drugs.

It would mark a significant geographical expansion of a novel approach that a few California counties, including Marin and San Francisco, began experimenting with over the last few years. And it signals a growing urgency as overdose deaths continue to soar. California reported nearly 7,400 opioid-related overdose deaths in 2022, the most recent full-year data available.

"The drug epidemic is horrific and getting worse," Haney said. "Wastewater testing pro-

vides critical information that can be used to respond rapidly to spikes in the use of drugs. We can't wait on people to die to know what's happening and where it's happening."

The data could help inform public policy — and responses.

"It's true that we're desperate for solutions," said Dr. Matt Willis, public health officer for Marin County, which started its wastewater surveillance program for fentanyl in 2023.

The purpose of testing sewage for traces of drugs is to try to better understand what drugs are flowing into a community so health officials can intervene early to reduce overdoses.

Current data on overdoses — deaths reported by hospitals and 911 calls for possible overdoses, for instance — are fragmented, incomplete and delayed, making it hard to know whether more dangerous drugs are coming into a region or city in real time before it's too late.

In Marin, when wastewater testing showed a

rise in norfentanyl — the metabolite found in urine that the body produces after using fentanyl — officials sent out an "overdose spike alert" to notify health care providers and groups that work with drug users that the risk of overdosing could be extra high at that moment, Willis said.

That way, local emergency departments, substance use treatment programs and mental health providers knew to "double down on measures we know can prevent overdose or save a life if someone has an overdose — making sure they're not using alone, having Narcan on hand, using fentanyl strips," Willis said.

Haney's bill, AB3073, would require local sanitation agencies to collect wastewater samples to test for fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine and morphine. It would mandate the state water board report the results to the state public health department.

The measure would not require all sewage plants in the state to submit samples for testing. Though

some of the details are still to be worked out in the legislative process, it would likely require about 250 major treatment plants to do so at least twice a week. And it would allow the state to request samples from minor treatment plants that are located in counties with high overdose deaths.

It would cost an estimated \$50 to \$200 per test, amounting to up to \$21,000 a year, that each county would be responsible for covering.

In the United States, testing sewage for infectious pathogens dates back many years, but it didn't become widespread until the COVID pandemic.

Applying the concept to drugs is relatively new.

Many countries in Europe, though, have been doing wastewater testing for drugs for more than 10 years to help monitor drug use, according to João Matias of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, which collects data on drug use and treatment from European Union countries. Wastewater is just one source of data that researchers combine with other sources, like surveys where people self-report drug use habits.

European sewage testing, though, focuses on stimulants such as MDMA, amphetamine,

methamphetamine and cocaine. The prevalence of fentanyl and other opioid use in the general population there is so low it'd be hard to detect accurately in wastewater, Matias said, so only a few cities are doing it — mostly for academic research.

Willis, of Marin, says he would support statewide sewage surveillance.

"It's offering yet another prism into this," he said. "I don't think we can overpromise what this is going to be able to do for us. But it does add a certain level of visibility that can contribute to our solutions."

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