Adam Crum
Commissioner

dhss.alaska.gov

Department of Health and Social Services

Anchorage, Alaska

STATE OF ALASKA

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Clinton Bennett, DHSS, 907-269-4996, clinton.bennett@alaska.gov

Project Gabe focuses on partnering with Alaska's industries to prevent opioid overdose deaths among those most at risk

June 8, 2022, ANCHORAGE – The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) is launching a new effort this summer called Project Gabe to provide opioid misuse awareness, education and prevention resources to industrial workers.

Project Gabe is named in honor of Gabe Johnston, who died of an opioid overdose in January of this year and was the son of Sitka Public Health Nurse Denise Ewing.

Project Gabe uses the existing DHSS program, Project HOPE, to distribute naloxone, a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose, and fentanyl test strips, which can test for the presence of fentanyl in drugs, to working Alaskans.

The program is being implemented first within fisheries in Southeast Alaska, by Public Health Nursing in partnership with the Office of Substance of Misuse and Addiction Prevention and members of the seafood industry.

Over time, the project will be expanded to include other industries and geographic regions.

"The majority of our workforce fits into the highest risk age group for drug overdose deaths – men who are 25-34 years old," said Bill Grant, plant production manager at Sitka Sound Seafood. "We care about our people and are grateful to have the tools to do something about it in an emergency."

Project Gabe will be providing education and naloxone free of charge through four main ways:

1) By installing opioid emergency boxes in common rooms within processing facilities, bunkhouses and offices
2) By distributing water-resistant bags containing naloxone on fishing fleet vessels
3) By providing opioid overdose kits to individuals to keep on hand in any location
4) By partnering with industry to provide education to Alaska workers about the risks of opioids and substance misuse

"This project builds on work already being done throughout the state by delivering an important message directly through workplaces to working Alaskans. Naloxone is safe to use

and easy to administer. Project Gabe makes it even more accessible as time is critical in an overdose. Naloxone can save a life when used right away, and we need to ensure it is widely available in every ship, every processor, every workplace in Alaska. Project Gabe is a critical step in that direction, sadly in memory of a young man gone too soon." said Alaska's Chief Medical Officer Dr. Anne Zink.

"This project is providing a way for me to help others as I grieve the loss of our son," Ewing said. "Gabe was bright, witty, opinionated, adventurous and full of creative energy. He loved hunting, camping, fishing and being outdoors. He was first introduced to drugs during his teenage years from a friend whose father had been prescribed pain medications. Unfortunately, Gabe became addicted after one pill, which led to more than 14 years of polysubstance abuse."

Members of the media are invited to come to the Noyes Pavilion at the University of Alaska Southeast between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. on Friday, June 10, to see the opioid emergency boxes being assembled and to talk with Public Health Nursing staff and members of the Juneau Opioid Workgroup, the local opioid prevention coalition. Please email Clinton Bennett at clinton.bennett@alaska.gov if you are interested in attending this event.

More resources:

- To connect with or participate in Project Gabe, email projectGabe@alaska.gov.
- For information about opioids in Alaska visit opioids.alaska.gov.
- DHSS also offers an Addiction and the Workplace toolkit for employers. Learn more here.

# # #