June 6, 2022

North Carolina County Commissioners

RE: North Carolina Opioid Settlement Funds

Dear County Commissioners and City Leaders,

As leaders of congregations and faith-based organizations across North Carolina, we are writing to you out of compassion for our communities, where overdose deaths are at an all-time high. We believe that each and every human being is created in the Image of God and should be treated with dignity and respect. This requires us to practice kindness, compassion, and forgiveness toward one another—regardless of our circumstances, the color of our skin, the chronic medical conditions we have, or the substances we use.

We have the opportunity with the historic opioid settlement between North Carolina and Johnson and Johnson and other opioid distributors not only to hold these companies accountable for their role in the overdose crisis, but also to use the settlement funds to create a better, healthier future where every one of our neighbors, each a child of God, is cared for.

The next steps in the settlement process will be vital: allocating the money and making decisions about where it goes. Harm reduction advocates—whom we work with to keep our communities safe—are calling on county and city leaders to spend the money on evidence-based solutions that are proven to save lives, and to ensure that those whose lives have been impacted by drug use have a seat at the decision-making table. We join them in their call.

North Carolina is slated to receive $750 million from this settlement. As faith leaders deeply invested in our communities, we urge county decision-makers and municipal authorities to commit to using their portions of the funds on the following proven measures:

1. **Fund Existing Syringe Service Programs and Put Overdose-Reversing Naloxone in Communities:** Legalized by Governor Pat McCrory in 2016, syringe service programs are proven to save lives by preventing overdose deaths, stopping the spread of HIV and hepatitis, and connecting people to essential medical care and treatment. In the last year alone, these programs distributed naloxone that reversed more than 12,000 overdoses across the state, and are implementing other public health measures to stop overdoses before they happen. It is vital to expand community access to naloxone so people who use drugs have access to the life-saving medication, as they are often the first responders in an overdose emergency. These critical programs need to be adequately funded.
2. **Ensure People Who Use Drugs Have a Seat at the Decision-Making Table:** No one understands the realities on the ground and the barriers to care better than people who use drugs and those who love them. When counties are making decisions about where to spend the settlement money, they need to ensure that people closest to the issue have a seat at the table. It's the best way to use the settlement money most effectively and save the most lives.
3. **Expand Access Methadone and Buprenorphine Treatment:** Methadone and buprenorphine are effective drug treatments that also reduce overdose deaths. But there is often trouble accessing these proven treatments because they are either not

affordable or not readily available in local communities. In fact, the Department of Health and Human Services says that 89% of North Carolinians are not able to access the treatment they need. Local leaders should expand access to methadone and buprenorphine by offering them in jails as well as through community programs. In fact, the US Department of Justice has clarified that not allowing these medications in jails is a violation of the American with Disabilities Act.

We want to make clear that faith-based does not have to mean abstinence-based. We would not deny proven medication to a person with another medical condition. We know that abstinence-based treatment has a 90% failure rate and that people receiving methadone or buprenorphine have half the death rate of those in abstinence-oriented treatment. Instead, a faith-based treatment response means meeting people where they are to provide them with the services they need to make the positive changes they prioritize. It means connecting them to treatment that is proven to work.

The Gospels are full of stories about Jesus meeting the needs of those who came to him. He did not offer them what he thought they should have, but rather gave them what they asked for. North Carolina has an opportunity to embody our faith's values of empathy and love by listening to what people affected by the overdose crisis really need and meeting those needs. As each County Commissioner and City Council member looks to your own faith and moral values for guidance in this decision, we hope you will keep these recommendations in mind.

Sincerely,

1. Rev. Barbara K. Armstrong, Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, Durham County
2. Rev. Wendy Bishop, Bethel United Methodist Church and Center United Methodist Church, Alamance County
3. Pastor Ted Bost, Chaplain Bethlehem Fire and Rescue, Mt. Olive Lutheran Church, Alexander County
4. Pastor Laura Byrch, Pastor of Community Engagement, Boone United Methodist Church, Watauga County
5. Pastor Vernon Cheek, St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church, Mecklenburg County
6. Rev. Dr. Eric Cole, Senior Pastor, Shalom Community Christian Church, Inc., Guilford County
7. Rev. Dr. Jennifer Copeland, Executive Director, North Carolina Council of Churches, Wake County
8. Rev. Carol Dalton, Ministry of Hope at WCCW, Buncombe County
9. Crystal T. Davis, President, The Book of Humanity, Guilford County
10. Rev. Rod Debs, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greenville, Pitt County
11. Rev. Cheri Dennis, Holy Covenant United Church of Christ, Mecklenburg County
12. Dr. Patrick Fuller, Executive Director, Raleigh Baptist Association, Wake County
13. Patrick Gallagher, Chiropractor, Chiropractic First PLLC, Wayne County
14. Kathy Greggs, Co-Founder/President, Fayetteville Police Accountability Community Taskforce, Cumberland County
15. Rev. Christopher Harbin, Sandy Grove and Parker United Methodist Churches, Union County
16. Tom Harris, Trustee, Pilgrim United Church of Christ, Durham County
17. Renee Hayes, Deaconess, North Carolina Council of Churches, Mecklenburg County
18. Brenda Howerton, Chair, Durham County Board of Commissioners, Durham County
19. Pastor Carrie Jarrell Tuning, HOPE Christian Fellowship Baptist Church, Guilford County

20. Dr. Sophia Kathariou, Community United Church of Christ, Wake County
21. Rev. Robert Kennel, Covenant Christian Church, Wake County
22. Judy Kirby, Elder, Bethany United Church of Christ, Catawba County
23. Blondine Knelsen, LCSW, Cornerstone Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Wayne County
24. Rev. Douglas S. Long, Umstead Park United Church of Christ, Wake County
25. Rev. Kristina Mares, Elder, Western North Carolina Conference, The United Methodist Church, Rowan County
26. Michelle Mathis, Executive Director, Olive Branch Ministry, Catawba County
27. Donald Matthews, Associate Minister, First Missionary Baptist Church, Chatham County
28. Rev. Vanesa McIntyre, United Methodist Church, Montgomery County
29. Gloria McNeill, SAMI Facilitator, Preacher, Trinity A.M.E Zion Church, Moore County
30. Douglas W. Mendenhall, Parishioner, Immaculate Conception Church, Durham County
31. Brenda Messera, Matthews United Methodist Church, Mecklenburg County
32. Rev. Karla Miller, First Congregational Church United Church of Christ, Henderson County
33. Rev. Annie Nelson, Alliance of Divine Love, Wake County
34. Pastor Randall L. Orwig, Senior Pastor, Elon Community Church United Church of Christ, Alamance County
35. Chalice Overy, Associate Pastor, Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, Wake County
36. Pastor Wil Posey, Murphy First United Methodist Church, Cherokee County
37. Pastor Sam Perkins, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Guilford County
38. Rev. Angela K. Powell, Pastor, Living Savior Lutheran, Mecklenburg County
39. Rev. Kathy Randall Bryant, Associate Pastor to Families, Trinity United Methodist Church, Cabarrus County
40. Pastor Ashley Randall, United Methodist Church, Forsyth County
41. Jessica Rowe, Master of Divinity, Wake Forest Divinity School, Forsyth County
42. Rev. Fred Rudder, Central United Church, Mecklenburg County
43. Rev. Mark A. Sandlin, Presbyterian Church of the Covenant, Guilford County
44. Pastor Michael T. Shannon, Chapel Hill Christian Church Disciples of Christ, Orange County
45. Pastor Alyce M Singletary, Person Street United Methodist Church, Cumberland County
46. Rev. Amelia Stinson-Wesley, Memorial United Methodist Church, Mecklenburg County
47. Pastor Josh Tester, Hoke Charge, Sandy Grove and Parker United Methodist Churches, Hoke County
48. Pastor Kristin Gerner Vaughn, Mt. Hope United Church of Christ, Guilford County
49. O'Linda D. Watkins, President, Moore County NAACP, Moore County
50. Rev. Jaye N. White, North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church, Cumberland County
51. Rev. Sara Wilcox, Land of the Sky United Church of Christ, Buncombe County
52. Dr. Charles W. “Chuck” Wilson II, Senior Pastor, Matthews United Methodist Church, Mecklenburg County
53. Rev. Leigh Wisner, Clemmons Presbyterian Church, Forsyth County
54. Pastor Mary G. Worsley, Emmanuel Community Baptist Church, Pitt County

NB: This letter reflects the views of the individuals who signed, and not necessarily that of their congregation or organization.