

Court News

Portland set to join nationwide lawsuit against opioid manufacturers

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Danielle West-Chuhta in a 2014 photo.

Seth Koenig | BDN

PORTLAND, Maine — Maine’s largest city is set to join a nationwide lawsuit against the makers of prescription painkillers that have contributed to state’s deadly opioid epidemic.

On Monday evening, the Portland City Council voted unanimously — and without discussion — to join legal actions that a New York law firm is bringing against opioid manufacturers.

The resolution claims that drug companies have engaged in “fraudulent and negligent marketing and distribution of opioids.” It would entitle Portland to part

of any financial winnings or settlement in the case, but won't cost the city a dime, according to Danielle West-Chuhta, the city's top lawyer.

Like many other cities and towns across the country, Portland has had to "bear the brunt" of combatting the opioid addiction and "suffered massive damages" from the crisis, West-Chuhta wrote in a memo to the City Council.

"Governments in charge of caring for addicts with social services programs, homeless shelters and police enforcement, among many other services, are now seeking to persuade the courts that the drug manufacturers bear some responsibility for these social costs and should help pay for them," West-Chuhta wrote.

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Last year, a record **376 Mainers died of drug overdoses**, including 42 people in Portland. That death toll represents a 39 percent increase over the previously record setting number of overdose deaths in 2015. More than 83 percent of last year's overdose deaths were attributed to opioids.

Four out of five new heroin users were first addicted to prescription painkillers, according to the American Society of Addiction Medicine.

The resolution adopted Monday allows the city to engage two law firms to prosecute its civil claims against opioid manufacturers and producers: Napoli Shkolnik PLLC and Trafton, Matzen, Belleau & Frenette LLP.

Napoli Shkolnik PLLC is based in New York and has brought similar suits against drug companies — such as Purdue Pharma, Teva Pharmaceuticals, Johnson & Johnson — on behalf of other cities, towns and counties. Its clients in these suits reportedly span the country, from **New Hampshire** to **New Mexico**.

Trafton, Matzen, Belleau & Frenette is based in Auburn.

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