

STATE

GOVERNOR, SENAT ELECTIONS



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# What Do Statewide Candidates Say About Opioids, Public Safety?

COMMENTARY

## Opioid Abuse Is Taking Tenn. Lives

BY FRANK DANIELS III

The 2018 elections are shaping up. The filing deadlines have passed, and most candidates are busy raising money, spending what they have already raised and/or borrowed to tell Tennesseans why they should vote for them and why they shouldn't vote for those other folks.

This year, for the first time in decades, voters will not have an incumbent in either of the two statewide elections. Gov. Bill Haslam is in the last year of his two-term limit, and Sen. Bob Corker has opted not to run for re-election.

The 124-member newspapers of the Tennessee Press Association are working together to present a forum for the major candidates in the gubernatorial and senate races. Each month we are asking candidates to briefly outline their position on a significant challenge facing Tennessee.

### TOO MANY DEATHS

Drive along Tennessee's busy interstate highways and you can't miss the signs warning drivers to buckle up and drive safely — emphasized reminders of how many people lost their lives on the state's roads.

In 2016, traffic accidents claimed the lives of 1,037 people, a nearly 8-percent increase over the previous year.

And when you read or watch the news headlines each week you are certain to learn about another murder in our state. In 2016, 470 people were murdered, almost 16 percent more than in 2015.

But you won't read digital signs or headlines about the fact that in 2016 the number of people who died from drug overdoses, primarily opioid overdoses, was greater than the combined deaths from traffic accidents and murder — 1,631 people died from a drug overdose in 2016.

### A GROWING TRAGEDY

The opioid crisis can be measured in many different ways, the excessive number of prescriptions — Tennessee ranks 49th among the states in the number of opioid prescriptions per person. Another grim statistic is that almost 37,000 different people were treated at a Tennessee hospital for opioid substance abuse or poisoning in 2016.

But it is the rapid increase in overdose deaths that illustrates the tragic nature of opioid abuse.

Since 2011 the number of people dying from a drug overdose, almost all from some form of opioids, has increased a staggering 154 percent. Deaths in traffic accidents increased almost 11 percent, and the number of people murdered is up 25 percent.

### CALL FOR ACTION

In his last budget, Haslam proposed a comprehensive approach to stemming the crisis, which he labels TN Together: Ending the opioid crisis.

The governor proposed that initial opioid prescriptions be limited to a five-day supply, with daily dosage amounts also limited. He asked that sentences be reduced for inmates who complete an intensive substance use treatment program. And he proposed updated controlled substance schedules to improve tracking, monitoring and penalties for distribution of some controlled substances, particularly fentanyl.

Taking a cue from the highway safety sign program, the governor wants to increase education about substance abuse in Tennessee schools and implement a public awareness campaign about the potential dangers of opioid use.

In August, President Donald Trump declared that the opioid crisis was "a national emergency," and hosted an "Opioid Summit" in March to formulate his administration's response. The president's plan is generally similar to the one proposed by Haslam.

What will new leaders do? Opioid abuse, murder and traffic accidents dominate the headlines of public safety and obscure the many moving parts that must be addressed to improve the health and wellbeing of Tennesseans, but these grim statistics are visible part of the iceberg that give us warning.

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The spread of opioid abuse claimed over 1,600 lives in Tennessee in 2016, and it is getting worse. Methamphetamine abuse, while not getting the headlines, has increased. Gun violence and murder is increasing. What proposals do our candidates have to help Tennesseans address these public safety issues?

The Tennessee Press Association asked each of the major candidates for governor and U.S. Senate to tell our readers about their views on infrastructure investment.

### GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATES

#### Republicans

##### Diane Black

The opioid epidemic is a scourge on our society, and I firmly believe the next governor will be judged by how she handles this crisis.

As I've traveled the state, I've sought input from the boots on the ground combating this epidemic. Working with the attorneys general and sheriffs on my Law and Order Coalition, we have developed a plan to go after the root cause of the crisis.

We can significantly reduce the destructive impact of addiction if we: 1) prosecute pill mills; 2) sue manufacturers who mislead providers about the addictive nature of their drugs; 3) provide more resources to district attorneys, local law enforcement and the TBI; 4) regulate prescriptions using a real-time Controlled Substance Monitoring Database without adding administrative burdens to providers and; 5) protect patients by encouraging pharmacies and manufacturers to include emetics in their formulas.

The road to healing is a long and difficult one for our state, but I am confident that bold collaboration between government, health care providers and law enforcement will pave the way.

We can't just stop at addiction. We have to broaden our view and look at crime as a whole.

As governor, I will be dedicated to giving law enforcement and schools the resources they need to be successful. I will work with school districts to provide a safe and secure environment, including armed school resource officers in every school and increased mental health screenings.

My administration will institute truth in sentencing for felony convictions and end the practice of allowing parole and probation violators to count their time in violation as time served.

As governor, I will get tough on repeat offenders, especially drug trafficking and domestic violence offenders. We can't keep letting repeat offenders walk the streets with our kids.

##### Randy Boyd

Opioids are decimating our communities, and this is a crisis that requires bold and decisive action. As I've traveled to all 95 counties, I've met countless people who talk about loved ones lost. These are real people, not just statistics, and this alone demands our action. Last September I published a 10-point plan, which can be summarized into three strategies: Mobilize, Prevent, Recover.

We must mobilize all state resources to end this scourge, and that begins with declaring a state of emergency

### COMING NEXT MONTH

This question-and-answer series will continue in May with a look at rural development and distressed counties. Like most of America, Tennessee's metropolitan areas have prospered during the last eight years, while the rural areas have lagged in almost every measure. The state has 19 of its 95 counties classified as "distressed." What can and should we do to give every Tennessean a chance to succeed?

### VOTE ONLINE

Go to GreenevilleSun.com to vote in a special poll commissioned by the Tennessee Press Association on statewide issues.

to implement policies that will assist our law enforcement throughout the state in these operations.

The TBI has partnered with local enforcement and other agencies and non-profits to tackle this problem. In addition, End Slavery Tennessee — a wonderful organization — works with these agencies and the community at large to raise awareness about this issue and to provide long-term, comprehensive, specialized services. This is a perfect example of a public-private partnership that attacks a problem from multiple angles. We are leading the nation as a state in our response to trafficking, but I've seen just how much work there is left to do, and as governor, I will support and continue those efforts.

##### Bill Lee

Over the last 10 years, a collective failure by government, pharmaceutical companies, and some in the medical community have left us with an opioid crisis that is crippling our state. There's no quick fix, and the solution will require shared responsibility from state and local institutions, our medical providers, and faith and community leaders.

The state is currently taking several common-sense first steps that we can build upon. For instance, restricting the use of addictive opioids, particularly in TennCare is an important preventative step. Currently one in three patients on TennCare have at least one opioid prescription. We know that after five days of use, the risk of addiction for new users sharply increases. Lowering the overall rate of prescriptions is an important first step to solving this crisis.

Another step is to increase funding and support for law enforcement drug interdiction efforts, which is critical to combat the flow of drugs from China and Mexico and the new threat of fentanyl. To combat this epidemic, the role of law enforcement cannot be overvalued.

On rehabilitation, we need to look at the entire continuity of recovery by bringing addicts back into the community with meaningful connections and skills to start a new life. I am heavily involved in prison ministry and I know that the window for rehabilitation must happen months, if not years before an offender's release from prison. Our next governor has an opportunity to lead the Department of Corrections into a new strategy for healing offenders before their release.

Finally, we must address our mental health support system by acknowledging the shortfalls in addiction treatment and support those working in mental health. For families in crisis, navigating the mental health system is often frustrating and complex, and we have to do better. As governor, I'll bring a comprehensive approach to overcoming our opioid crisis.

#### Democrats

##### Karl Dean

I have seen, as I'm sure many others have, the human toll the opioid crisis is having on our state. I have toured a Johnson City children's

hospital that had to add space for premature babies born suffering from opioid withdrawals. I have heard from law enforcement, treatment providers and social workers on the challenges they are facing, both with criminal and mental health issues, related to opioids.

As governor, I would take a four-pronged approach:

- Public education about the dangers of opioids
- Ensuring that people addicted to opioids get the treatment they need
- Supporting law enforcement to arrest those who are profiting
- Eliminating over-prescription of narcotics

As mayor of Nashville, public safety was one of my top priorities and that was reflected in the city's operating budget. Even when other departments were being cut due to the recession, we protected funding for public safety. Over my eight years in office, we increased the Metro Nashville Police Department's budget. We also invested millions in building new precincts and our city's own crime lab. We also increased the number of police officers. In return, overall major crime was down when I left office than when my first term began, including record low homicide numbers in 2013 and 2014.

Our government's No. 1 job is to keep people safe, and so as governor, public safety would be a priority. I would be willing to have tough conversations across party lines to see what we can agree on in this state as it relates to gun safety and move from there to help keep our children and families safe. We should be working to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people. Additionally, I would be in support of a ban on bump fire stocks, and we need to look at the age limit for purchasing an assault weapon. There are public safety reasons why you can't buy alcohol until you're 21, and those same public safety reasons logically apply to purchasing an assault weapon.

##### Craig Fitzhugh

The opioid and methamphetamine crisis is tearing up our state, especially in our rural areas. There has been a push in the legislature this year to address this crisis, and while I back those efforts, I do not believe that they go far enough.

The governor proposed a plan, committing \$30 million to combating opioids. Less than half of that money comes from state funds. There are individual hospitals that have committed more funding to opioids. If our state had expanded Medicaid, we would have additional funds for opioids and methamphetamine issues, especially in the aforementioned rural areas. Tennessee has had more per capita hospital closures than any other state, almost all in our rural counties. Open hospitals offer more opportunities for treatment for opioid addiction.

Methamphetamine is a problem not just from its use but also from its creation. It can be created from just a few ingredients that can be easily found, and it ruins the homes it is created in and is very harmful to children. Education and prevention is key. We have slowed the growth of meth somewhat with roadblocks at our pharmacies, but more must be done, as law enforcement is being overwhelmed.

Gun violence is increasing. Not only are mass shootings on the rise

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### Deaths In Tennessee By Cause, 2011-2016

Year	Overdoses	% chg	Traffic	% chg	Homicide	% chg
2011	1,062		937		375	
2012	1,094	3.01%	1,014	8.22%	390	4.00%
2013	1,166	6.58%	995	-1.87%	333	-14.62%
2014	1,263	8.32%	963	-3.22%	375	12.61%
2015	1,457	15.36%	962	-0.10%	406	8.27%
2016	1,631	11.94%	1,037	7.80%	470	15.76%
2017			1,040	0.29%		

### Increase In Deaths Since 2011

Drug overdoses	153.58%
Traffic accidents	10.67%
Homicide	25.33%