The following is a compendium of news reports over the past month that may be of interest to our AG offices who are dealing with substance abuse issues. Neither the National Association of Attorneys General nor the National Attorneys General Training & Research Institute expresses a view as to the accuracy of news accounts, nor as to the position expounded by the authors of the hyperlinked articles.

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The Legalization of Marijuana
This month, United States Attorney General Eric Holder stated that legal marijuana sellers should have access to the banking system and indicated that the Justice Department would issue guidelines for prosecutors and federal law enforcement. General Holder further stated that the Justice Department is working with the Treasury Department to develop regulations for the banking industry relating to the use of banks by these businesses.

A number of localities within states including Oregon, California, Washington and Colorado are considering bans on marijuana businesses and sales. Washington’s Attorney General, Bob Ferguson, recently issued a formal opinion stating that local governments have the ability to ban recreational marijuana; even after the initiative legalizing it was approved in 2012.

New Developments in Combatting Prescription Drug Abuse
This month, a number of doctors faced criminal charges and/or disciplinary action in connection with the overprescribing of opioids. For example, the Indiana Medical Licensing Board suspended the license of an Indiana doctor who pre-signed blank prescription pads for his staff to use independently. His practice was linked to the drug-related deaths of 31 people. In Georgia, a doctor was convicted of 51 felony charges in connection with the operation of an illegal pill mill. In Kansas, a doctor pleaded guilty to conspiring to distribute controlled substances, after he allowed employees at his pain clinic to write hundreds of prescriptions for controlled substances while he was traveling, using blank prescriptions that he had signed. Last, in Pennsylvania, a doctor is facing charges after he allegedly provided a patient $43,000 worth of narcotics prescriptions in exchange for yard work.

Maryland’s state health information exchange has announced that it will integrate with the state’s Prescription Drug Monitoring Program. This integration will result in more data provided to prescribers and will help to connect those in need with treatment options.

A policy paper published in Annals of Internal Medicine outlines clinical and policy recommendations made by the American College of Physicians aimed at reducing opioid abuse. The proposals include a national prescription drug monitoring program, evidence-based, nonbinding guidelines for physicians, and increased medical research on addiction.

Updates Relating to Synthetic Drugs
This month, the DEA published notices of intent to temporarily place a number of synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic cathinones in Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act, based on findings that the scheduling is necessary to avoid an imminent hazard to the public safety.

Research from the University of Colorado School of Medicine, recently published in the New England Journal of Medicine, indicates that synthetic cannabinoids are becoming more potent, which increases the danger of illness and
deaths relating to the drugs. The author stressed the importance of identifying the most dangerous substances and ensuring that the community is educated about the dangers of these drugs.

This month, Colorado Attorney General John Suthers announced that his office will sue an Aurora market for the marketing and sale of “spice,” an illegal synthetic cannabinoid.

Pending State Legislation Relating to Substance Abuse
The Kentucky legislature is considering Senate Bill 5, also known as the heroin bill, which will allow prosecutors to charge drug traffickers with homicide when the sale of heroin results in an overdose death. It would also require high-volume drug dealers to serve at least half of their prison sentences, provide funding for anti-drug education, and require the state’s Medicaid program to cover more substance abuse treatment options.

The Oklahoma legislature is considering House Bill 2323, which will expand current bans on specific synthetic drugs. In Minnesota, Attorney General Lori Swanson and members of the House Select Committee on Controlled Substances, introduced a legislative package that will increase regulations on synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones. A bill will be filed during the 2014 legislative session. A list of the recommended regulations can be found be using this link.

NAAG President and Wisconsin Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen issued a statement in support of legislation pending in the Wisconsin legislature. The Heroin Opiate Prevention and Education (HOPE) legislation requires individuals to show identification to pick up opioid prescriptions, expands the availability of Narcan to first responders, and also includes a Good Samaritan provision, which provides limited immunity to those individuals who call 911 or take overdose victims to an emergency room.

Other News of Interest
Congress passed a bipartisan appropriations bill this month. The bill provides funding for the Substance Abuse Block Grant, SAMHSA’s Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) initiative, and drug courts. The bill also provides funds to expand the HOPE diversion model. Click on this link for the White House Drug Policy Office’s press release, which includes more information relating to each program.

Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin devoted his “State of the State” address to substance abuse issues. He focused on opioid abuse, calling the addiction problem in his state a “full-blown heroin crisis” and outlined a plan to increase funding for treatment.

Thirty people have been sentenced to death, and 13 people have been sentenced to life in jail, for trafficking heroin and synthetic drugs in Vietnam. A total of 89 people were found guilty.