

Utah spent \$250K on a surveillance company instead of a lifesaving overdose drug

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By Taylor Stevens

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Last March, the Utah Department of Health asked for some of the thousands of dollars the state was funneling into a private surveillance company to pay for naloxone, a lifesaving drug that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose.

But the state instead opted to allocate about \$250,000 via the Health Department to Banjo, which was building an unproven technology to fight the opioid crisis, Vice News first reported Tuesday.

Anna Fondario, who manages the Violence & Injury Prevention Program at the Utah Department of Health, wrote in a March 2019 email to staff at the Utah Drug Enforcement Administration that her office had identified a need “for an additional supply of naloxone kits to cover a potential two-month gap before other funding is available for kits.”

She asked if the remaining money from a program called DEA 360 could be used for naloxone, according to emails obtained by The Salt Lake Tribune.

Later that day, Brian S. Besser, then-DEA district agent in charge for Utah, forwarded Fondario’s email to his colleague Ciara Gregovich and to Utah Attorney General chief of staff Ric Cantrell.

“I want these funds (the whole \$250K) to go to Banjo. ... I thought this was already in progress?” Besser said.

Fondario told The Tribune on Tuesday that the department was able to find funding to get it through the gap she identified in her March 2019 email. But the \$250,000 would have gone a long way toward purchasing and disseminating intranasal naloxone, which the state Department of Health can buy for \$75 per unit.

With limited state funding, the Health Department currently has the ability to purchase just over 500 naloxone kits per quarter, or 168 kits a month, but has “far more demand than we have kits,” Fondario said.

“The opioid epidemic in our state is pretty far-reaching; there’s probably not a single corner in Utah that hasn’t been touched,” so having the ability to prepare people to “save someone’s life if they are overdosing” is an important part of the department’s efforts, she added.

Utah Naloxone, an organization that advocates for the drug and provides training on how to use it, disseminates the most doses of naloxone in the state, Fondario said.

In the past three years, Banjo has relocated to Utah, struck up a cozy relationship with the state’s attorney general and started building a massive real-time surveillance system that listens to 911 calls and monitors traffic cameras, the location of police cars, social media and more, The Tribune has reported.

The Utah Department of Public Safety says the technology could help improve response times to traffic accidents, while the University of Utah says it could help U. police ensure “more seamless coordination and communication” with law enforcement partners across the state. But security experts, professors and civil libertarians have all raised concerns about the direction Utah is headed with Banjo.

The company’s founder and CEO, Damien Patton, won’t say what data the company collects, how many police agencies in Utah are participating or what’s being done to protect the privacy of Utahns. The company routinely denies news media requests for comment.

But Cantrell told Vice News that the company is working on building an opioid module that would include a heat map made up of “emergency room visits, morgue visits, naloxone use” to help law enforcement see where overdose epidemics are happening and respond accordingly. The Libertas Institute said Monday on Twitter that House Majority Leader Francis Gibson, R-Mapleton, has “indicated that he’s willing to potentially sponsor legislation” it is developing with the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah to ensure Banjo and companies like it are not inappropriately obtaining, using or sharing private information.



Rep. Gibson has indicated that he’s willing to potentially sponsor legislation we develop along w/ [@acluutah](#) to make sure Banjo and other companies like them are not inappropriately obtaining/using/sharing private information.

More to come in the months ahead. [#utpol](#) <https://t.co/5h4jwoRfN5>
— Libertas Institute (@LibertasUtah) [March 9, 2020](#)

“More to come in the months ahead,” the organization concluded. Gibson in the past has criticized the surveillance system Banjo is building in cooperation with the state as akin to “Big Brother” in George Orwell’s novel “1984” about an authoritarian government that constantly spies on its citizens. He also has compared it to the creation of “NSA Utah.”

Jason Stevenson, a spokesman with the ACLU, said Tuesday that conversations with Gibson “have been ongoing.” Any legislation would likely set some kind of statewide standards for how the technology can be used and set expectations of privacy to maintain as they’re rolled out, he said.

“The benefit of having more rigorous oversight and guardrails is you have a more central authority asking those questions and keeping everything in line so one city doesn’t give away the farm in terms of privacy and then that can be used even in other cities, sort of a race to the bottom in terms of privacy,” he said. “Utahns don’t really like to be considered lab animals and having a little bit better oversight that the Legislature and other state agencies could provide would be a little more helpful.”