



Testimony

of

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before the

New York State Senate Joint Task Force on Opioids, Addiction & Overdose Prevention

on

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the overdose crisis

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Good morning, Chairs Rivera, Harckham, and Brouk. My name is Dr. Chinazo Cunningham, I am the Executive Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Mental Hygiene at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). On behalf of New York City Health Commissioner Dr. Dave Chokshi and Mayor Bill de Blasio, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the impacts of COVID-19 on the overdose crisis in New York City (NYC).

The year 2020 is positioned to be the deadliest year of the overdose epidemic in NYC. In the first nine months of 2020 alone, there were 1,446 overdose deaths, almost as many as all of 2019. In addition to impacts from COVID-19, fentanyl is driving this increase in NYC: over 75% of overdose deaths in the first 9 months of 2020 involved fentanyl. We also continue to see deep inequities in the burden of overdose: neighborhoods such as the South Bronx, East Harlem, and Central Harlem, continued to experience the highest rates of overdose in 2020. These neighborhoods are also among the neighborhoods hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 inhibited many people with opioid use disorder from staying connected to treatment and other services, increasing the risk of overdose.

During the height of the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City, DOHMH recognized that while many recreational and social activities were “on pause,” New Yorkers’ lives and needs were not. In response, we rapidly deployed innovative strategies to meet the needs of New Yorkers with substance use disorder and combat the growing overdose epidemic. We worked closely with syringe service programs and opioid overdose prevention programs to help them transition to telehealth and virtual platforms, identify new ways to deliver services, and keep clients engaged while adhering to physical distancing and other COVID-19 prevention guidelines. Perhaps most groundbreaking, in partnership with New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports, we launched a new Methadone Delivery System to make medication available to patients while in isolation or quarantine. Through this partnership, DOHMH made more than 5,400 deliveries to nearly 1,200 clients between April 20, 2020 and July 2, 2020.

Additionally, the City reduced barriers to naloxone during the pandemic, making it available and free via mail, at select pharmacies in neighborhoods with a high burden of fatal overdose, in all isolation hotels, and in many congregate care settings, in addition to the 800+ Opioid Overdose Prevention Program sites where free naloxone continued to be available.

In early 2021, the City announced that it is ramping up additional substance use disorder services totaling \$45M a year, including a new fentanyl awareness campaign, increased distribution of fentanyl test strips, expanded access to harm reduction drop-in and outreach services, and investments into same-day access to buprenorphine for people experiencing homelessness.

But as the toll of the overdose crisis grows, it is clear we need to use every public health strategy available to address this public health crisis. To that end, New York City strongly supports the authorization of overdose prevention centers (OPCs). Unequivocally, overdose prevention centers save lives. There are nearly 100 overdose prevention centers operating in 10 countries across the world, and over the last 30 years, no fatal overdoses have occurred in these locations. Overdose prevention centers are clinical, hygienic spaces where people can use drugs under the supervision of trained professionals. These programs improve access to health care and provide pathways to substance use and mental health treatment, social services, and basic needs. Overdose prevention centers would complement existing drug treatment and syringe service programs by providing additional opportunities for education, engagement, and referral. And, overdose prevention centers address community concerns by decreasing public drug use, drug-related crimes, and syringe litter.

In 2018, the Health Department completed a study that demonstrated the feasibility and potential impact of overdose prevention centers operating in NYC. That study showed that implementing up to four overdose prevention centers in NYC could prevent up to 130 overdose deaths each year and save up to \$7 million in direct healthcare costs.

The time for swift, life-saving action is now.

We are supporting providers to identify pathways to operate overdose prevention centers and look forward to the day when this lifesaving approach is adopted across New York City, State and the country.

Your support and action are critical, and to that end, we support the currently active pieces of legislation regarding overdose prevention centers. We strongly support Senate bill S2530 to establish an overdose prevention center pilots, and the City urges the Senate to approve this legislation expeditiously. We also support Senate bill S603, which would establish an Overdose Prevention Center Program in New York State and look forward to discussing details further with the bill sponsors. We greatly appreciate the Senate's continued interest and advocacy – not only for overdose prevention center authorization, but for your focus on providers' needs, funding, and resources related to overdose prevention and connection to substance use services in New York.

Thank you to the chairs for your continued partnership and commitment to promoting the health of all New Yorkers, particularly those impacted by substance use and overdose. I am happy to take any questions.