

## **Joint Senate Task Force on Opioids, Addiction & Overdose Prevention**

### **Testimony of Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr.**

**August 9, 2019**

#### **We must understand who is using opioids in order to combat the epidemic**

Tens of thousands of New Yorkers are addicted to opioids, putting their lives and health on the line every day. Thousands of these New Yorkers overdose and die every year – over 3,000 people died from opioid overdoses statewide in 2016.<sup>i</sup> And these numbers are only getting worse.<sup>ii</sup> This is a crisis and the state must do more to make sure that we can get these people the help that they deserve to live healthy, clean, and fruitful lives.

As Bronx Borough President, I am especially concerned with the high levels of opioid use and overdose in The Bronx. Three of the five city neighborhoods with the highest levels of overdoses involving heroin or fentanyl in 2016 were in The Bronx.<sup>iii</sup> The Bronx had the second-highest rate of opioid overdoses in 2016 after Staten Island<sup>iv</sup> and the highest number of fatal overdose victims at 279.<sup>v</sup> And 2017 was even worse, with the Bronx passing Staten Island to have the highest rate in the city. While this scourge is a concern for the whole city, state, and country, the ravages of this epidemic have been harming the low-income communities of color in the South Bronx for many years. In 2017, the South Bronx had a higher overdose rate than in 49 out of 50 states.<sup>vi</sup> I am glad that this issue has been getting the attention that it has long deserved in recent years. But it should not have taken so long for real attention to be paid to this crisis.

#### **Wraparound services are essential for preventing and treating opioid addiction**

We must enact a consistent and comprehensive program to treat individuals who suffer from opioid addiction. We must address the causes of addiction through healthcare and fix our broken criminal justice and reentry systems to allow those in recovery to lead a healthy and productive lifestyle. Our first priority has to be treatment in our healthcare system. We must help those struggling with addiction get the help that they need to break the hold that these drugs hold over them. We must treat addiction as the disease that it is instead of simply continuing to shuffle addicts into the criminal justice system.

We must work to address the root causes of opioid abuse. We must tackle the over-prescription of opioid painkillers when there are other options available. We must also engage in an education campaign towards our youth to make sure that they are steered away from falling victim to this epidemic. This education must begin in our schools but it cannot end there. Families and communities must be involved to help steer vulnerable youths away from drugs.

The services that our government agencies and community organizations provide to those suffering with opioid addiction must be comprehensive and holistic. Wraparound services are an essential step in treating and preventing opioid addiction. By treating the whole person instead of just the addiction, we can help these individuals overcome their struggle with opioids and move towards healthy lives.

We should offer more outpatient services for individuals who voluntarily go to seek help. There needs to be more inclusive mental health treatment for those who need it, including for those at risk of falling into addiction. Preventing people from starting to use opioids is the best way to stop overdoses before they become a real risk. We must work with community organizations to open clinics in vulnerable communities where at-risk community members can go for holistic treatment. NIMBY-ism will not be tolerated.

The best advocates for those struggling with addiction can be those who have overcome this struggle and are now living a healthy and sober lifestyle. We must help connect these two groups in a peer mentorship relationship which can help these individuals break their addictions. Relapses are a huge challenge to break opioid addictions once and for all. Peer mentorship can provide the accountability that people may need to prevent a relapse and to continue a healthy lifestyle.

### **Access to Naloxone must be expanded to help prevent overdose deaths**

We must also work to prevent overdose deaths. In recent years, I have worked with Councilman Ritchie Torres and the rest of the City Council to propose legislation expanding access to Naloxone.<sup>vii</sup> While access to this life-sustaining medication is wider than ever before, we need to do much more to ensure that we prevent as many fatal opioid overdoses as possible. I commend emergency responders, health workers, and the NYPD for their efforts to make sure that people who are overdosing have access to Naloxone.

But we must increase the availability of this medication to make sure that no one dies because it was not available. Naloxone kits are available at numerous community-based programs and the drug may be purchased at many participating pharmacies.<sup>viii</sup> However, we must increase the number of members of the public who have received the appropriate training to be able to administer Naloxone in an emergency situation.

### **We must focus on treatment instead of incarceration**

Those suffering with addiction too often find themselves caught up in the criminal justice system. However, courts, jails, and prisons are not the optimal places for individuals with addiction issues to overcome their challenges and find their way to sobriety. We must shift the focus from the criminal justice system to the healthcare system to ensure that those that need our help can get support instead of prosecution.

We must support innovative solutions to the opioid crisis, diverting individuals who are addicted to opioids into drug treatment courts instead of criminal courts when they have committed non-violent offenses. The best way to prevent opioid overdose deaths is to get people off of opioids. Treatment accomplishes this, not incarceration.

If we continue to treat those struggling with addiction as criminals instead of people who need help, there will be no end to the revolving door in and out of jail. We have to break the cycle of addiction, and that happens through treatment.

While those suffering from addiction should be steered away from the criminal justice system, there is still a role for police and prosecutors. I am proud to support the NYPD's efforts to identify and arrest those who engage in criminal enterprises to introduce dangerous substances like heroin and fentanyl onto our streets.<sup>ix</sup> Making it harder for the public to have access to these drugs will reduce the number of overdoses – fatal and otherwise.

### **The state must adequately fund services and treatment**

The state government has made a strong start in reforming our criminal justice system. But we encourage leaders in Albany to do more to help steer addicts into treatment and recovery rather than punishment and incarceration. The state legislature should expand funding to the diversion and other substance-abuse treatment programs that currently operate through the Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services and other agencies.

But we must not become complacent in the face of this daunting epidemic. We need innovative solutions to this problem to prevent more and more people from falling into addiction. Getting stuck in the same patterns of enforcement will not get us any closer to solving this crisis. We need broad-based solutions involving all city and state agencies working together to achieve the best outcomes for our city's residents.<sup>x</sup>

But we must look beyond simply using government services. The state must provide funding to non-profits working in impacted communities to ensure that they are adequately funded to be able to meet the needs of the communities and individuals that they are serving. This funding can later save the state money through reducing the number of individuals who will later have to be prosecuted, incarcerated, and provided healthcare. We must act proactively instead of coming in at the last moment, which is often too late for those we have lost to fatal overdoses.

Thank you for your efforts to make New York a safer and healthier place to live, work, and raise a family. I hope that we can continue to work together to ensure that no New Yorkers will remain addicted to opioids when we have the capability to get them the help that they need.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/opioid/data/pdf/nys\\_opioid\\_annual\\_report\\_2018.pdf](https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/opioid/data/pdf/nys_opioid_annual_report_2018.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/opioid/data/pdf/nys\\_opioid\\_annual\\_report\\_2018.pdf](https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/opioid/data/pdf/nys_opioid_annual_report_2018.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3350756&GUID=FDf2262B-1A25-43AC-98EB-3B4FEA9613ED&Options=&Search=> in the hearing testimony 2/27/18

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/opioid/data/pdf/nys\\_opioid\\_annual\\_report\\_2018.pdf](https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/opioid/data/pdf/nys_opioid_annual_report_2018.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3350756&GUID=FDf2262B-1A25-43AC-98EB-3B4FEA9613ED&Options=&Search=> in the Committee Report 2/27/18

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/nyregion/bronx-opioid-overdoses-fentanyl.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3350756&GUID=FDf2262B-1A25-43AC-98EB-3B4FEA9613ED&Options=&Search=>

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<https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/policy/health-care/exclusive-new-york-city-council-consider-bills-combat-opioid-epidemic>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/naloxone.page>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/nyregion/bronx-opioid-overdoses-fentanyl.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.gothamgazette.com/city/8305-acknowledging-mayoral-run-diaz-jr-gives-tenth-state-of-the-borough-address>