

EXPONENTS

Improving health. Igniting hope.

Testimony at the Joint NYS Senate Task Force on Opioids, Addiction and Overdose Prevention

August 9, 2019

Thank you for both the opportunity to provide testimony in this important matter and much gratitude for your hard work in leaning into solutions instead of rhetoric. I am Joseph Turner, co-founder and currently President and CEO of Exponents. I am also co-chair of the New York State Harm Reduction Association. Although it is good to be in the Bronx, was born and raised in Brownsville, Brooklyn – yet survived it all, even with the many attendant structural barriers to living our best lives with the best opportunities. But my most important credential is that I am a person in sustained recovery with a hard-core harm reductionist heart - convinced that we must not only reduce the harm that problematic drug use inflicts on drugs users, but we must also reduce the harm that society itself inflicts on all of us.

Exponents, is a 30-year-old community-based multi-service human services and social justice agency. We are one of the first harm reduction agencies in the nation, with over 11,000 participants completing our array of 14 different program services. Specifically, we offer harm reduction drug treatment services, HIV/AIDS wellness, testing and case management services, professional training and education, as well as prison transitional and re-entry services for former prisoners. Abstinence is not required for admission to, or for the completion of, any of our program services. ***And while we meet people where they are - we don't leave them there!***

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We've been outside all morning, raising our voices to support bill **A.7246/S.5935** which, as you know, will remove substantial barriers to receiving life-saving medication to treat substance use disorders (SUDs) by removing prior authorization requirements for buprenorphine, methadone and naltrexone in Medicaid. When an individual needs medication for the treatment of a substance use disorder, waiting even a couple of days can prove fatal. Decades of research show overwhelming evidence that MAT, when provided promptly, can save lives and reduce overall healthcare spending. However, studies also suggest that requiring prior authorizations and other administrative burdens can reduce the provision of MAT and limit access for patients who need it most. *And that ain't right!*

There is no good sense in requiring folks needing help to jump through unnecessary hoops to access a lifesaving treatment. In fact, the requirement itself has no rational basis in fact, other than the proliferation of the stigma that supports spaces of judgment, blame and systemic, class and racial divisions. In addition, this will harm poor people the most, who do not have access to primary care and thus no ability to acquire "prior approval".

As a community-based agency, we see everyday, up front and personal, the pain that is prevalent in our communities. We should be enhancing access to treatment, rather than denying it.... We must jump through the hoop of prior approval into a health system that is deficient on its face.... into a health system that has resulted in the disparate and deficient health care for people of color.

In 2017, in there were 3,224 overdose deaths involving opioids in New York State—a rate of 16.1 deaths per 100,000 persons compared to the average national rate of 14.6 deaths per 100,000 persons and a rate of 8 people dying every day. *And truth be told, that ain't right!* It is criminal to deny or delay access to FDA-approved medications. To impose a requirement that promotes that delay is both dangerous and deadly. - and that is why we urge the governor to sign the bills on his desk.

So, in conclusion - well, not in conclusion - because the struggle for access to treatment, affordable and equitable health care will continue and none of us who were outside this morning, or who have testified in this hearing, are going anywhere soon.

But I leave you on a note of deep concern. For people of color, the overdose crisis is not going anywhere. Indeed, while the recent data shows that overdose death rates are declining

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among whites, death rates are rising among blacks and women. And while over the last several years, we have seen money pour into treatment and recovery services and we have seen a societal response of compassion, support and resources. But we cannot forget that this response was much different from the reaction to the crack epidemic where there was no face of recovery, only a black and brown face of addiction. That response was scorn, judgment, racialized mass incarceration and pejorative terms of “crack head, crack baby and crack whore” ...

My concern is that if the victims of overdoses will again become predominantly those folks that look like me and you.... then the compassion will stop, the resources will dry up and the prisons will fill up, and once again, we return to the days of “Ray-Ray” and “Flaco” (LOL), dying anonymous deaths in project stairways. ***This cannot, and will not happen on our watch*** And as we advance the struggle for universal access to treatment services, and truth be told, universal access to health care in general, we are saving lives.

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Joseph R. Turner, JD*
President and CEO
Exponents, Inc.

**Joseph R. Turner, JD, is the co-founder and current President/CEO of Exponents, Inc. Exponents is the first known harm reduction substance use disorder treatment program, beginning in 1988. Exponents is founded on the principles of ‘engagement, community and advocacy’. Abstinence is not required for admission, participation or completion of any of Exponents programs – with over 11,000 NYC substance users completing their programs. As an attorney, Mr. Turner has worked for Harlem Legal Services, National Conference of Black Lawyers and also maintained a private practice that focused on the representation of civil rights litigation, criminal defense and community development. He has previously served as Chief Operating Officer of Harlem United, Executive Director of the Fountain Avenue Community Development Corporation and former Chairman of the Board of Friends of Recovery – New York (FOR-NY). He has provided consultant services to various social justice and behavioral health organizations. He is a member of the Board of Directors of Exodus Transitional Services, co-chair of the NYS Harm Reduction Association as well as co-chair of the OASAS Recovery Implementation Team. Mr. Turner’s recovery and activism is anchored and maintained upon the same harm reduction principles of Exponents – “meeting folks where they are...but not leaving them there”.*