



Testimony of Jasmine Budnella, Drug Policy Coordinator at VOCAL-NY. Given at the NYS Senate Opioids, Addiction & Overdose Prevention Joint-Task Force Hearing

Delivered August 9, 2019 at St. Barnabas Hospital - 4487 3rd Ave, The Bronx, NY 10457

I would like to start by thanking Senator Rivera for his relentless leadership and commitment to elevating the voices of the Bronx, as well as his long legacy of championing compassionate and evidence-based solutions to the overdose crisis. Also, special thanks to Senator Harckham and Senator Carlucci for their commitment to prioritizing the overdose crisis. This gratitude comes not just from me, but from all the statewide members/leaders and staff of VOCAL-NY, as well as the entire statewide End Overdose NY coalition, made up of family members of those lost to overdose, treatment providers, community advocates, and people with a history of drug use.

To be clear, my testimony—and the testimony you will hear throughout the statewide tour—is a message directed at the NYS Senate as a whole.

We are in a defining moment of history, one that will forever be seen as an opportunity for those in power to show leadership and course correct the decades-long humanitarian disaster that is our current “war on drugs” policy. The overdose crisis demands urgency in order to heal our communities, dismantle deadly stigma, and ensure that the thousands of lives we have lost throughout our state to preventable overdose are not forgotten—all while fighting so that not one more life is lost.

Taking action to confront this crisis can be the great unifier of our state, or it can be the great divider. Today we lay that responsibility at the Senate’s door, and challenge you all to choose courage and heed the words of evidence. To not fall back on failed tactics that have proven to perpetuate poverty, incarceration, and death in our communities.

Many of us here today have already testified at hearings, participated in statewide roundtables, brought in experts to help educate and consult elected officials, and engaged in deep dialogue with state agencies on proven evidence-based solutions. I would like to submit The Ithaca Plan (drafted in 2016) into the public record. This blueprint is by no means exhaustive, but it demonstrates recommendations like these have been researched and proposed long ago. It’s time for the Senate Leadership and this Task Force to move beyond listening and into action.

You must:

- **Immediately Increase Funding for Harm Reduction Agencies and Services Across New York State.** Governor Cuomo has continually recycled his talking point of dedicating \$200 million to the crisis—never actually increasing the state’s investment. Every time he announces new funding, it is supplanted.

- **Demand the Approval of Overdose Prevention Centers:** For over 30 years, evidence shows that OPCs are an intervention to keep people alive and connect them to services. We are tired of losing people because they are forced alone into the shadows to die.
- **Universal Access to Medication-Assisted Treatment (Buprenorphine and Methadone).** When we say “universal access,” we mean access in the community, in emergency rooms, in shelters, and in prisons and jails across New York State. While we urge the state to move towards decarceration, until we get there, we cannot leave our brothers and sisters on the inside to suffer without this lifesaving medication. That means we must also remove Medicaid barriers to increase access to MAT. We have treatment deserts throughout our state. We must remove prior authorizations to all formularies for MAT (this is the only overdose prevention bill passed this session for low-income NYers, and we are still waiting for the Governor’s signature); increase reimbursement rates for providers so they can continue to provide lifesaving care without fearing how to keep their lights on; and change reimbursement rates for Peer Educators so that people who have lived experience—who are so critical in this work—get paid a living wage.
- **Decriminalize Public Health Tools:** We have been fighting for a decade to pass the bill to decriminalize syringes and expand syringe access. We must get this done this year.
- **Rapidly Increase Supportive Housing:** Fully fund and create 20,000 units of supportive housing across New York State. Supportive housing breaks the cycle of homelessness by pairing permanent housing with on-site services for people with a history of substance use, and/or who have mental and physical health needs.
- **Fight Back Against Failed Drug War Tactics:** Criminalization will never decrease the overdose crisis. In fact, it dismantles critical public health responses and interventions to the crisis, and inevitably harms communities of color and low-income New Yorkers. Proposals like scheduling fentanyl in the controlled substance act, increasing penalties for possession and sales, and drug-induced homicide laws (like Senator Amedore’s Laree’s Law) must end today.

The road to accomplishing these proven solutions cannot end with the statewide tour or a report. We need the entire Senate to carry our voices--and center them--into the next legislative session. We need the entire Legislature to stop asking, “Why did this person do this to themselves?” but instead, “How did we let this happen to our people?”

Thank you for allowing me to testify, and we look forward to working with the Task Force and the Senate in the future.

Jasmine Budnella  
 Drug Policy Coordinator  
 VOCAL-NY