



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

O'Mara serving on new Senate task force to examine growing heroin epidemic regionally, statewide

THOMAS F. O'MARA March 18, 2014

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Albany, N.Y., March 18—State Senator Tom O'Mara (R,C-Big Flats) said today that he will serve as a member on the Senate Majority Coalition's new Task Force on Heroin and Opioid Addiction.

The creation of the bipartisan task force was announced in Albany. It arrives as local police departments, including many across the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions, continue to point to the alarming rise in the availability and use of heroin, methamphetamine and other illegal drugs.

O'Mara, who has been highlighting the proliferation of meth and heroin across the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes over the past few years, said that the special panel will target the alarming rise in heroin use and addiction across New York, and develop legislative recommendations for combating, preventing and treating the drug's spread.

"We can't ignore the alarming threat of meth, heroin and other illegal drugs spreading throughout our communities. The risks are too great for these epidemics to spiral out of control and overwhelm our local systems of health care, law enforcement, criminal justice and social services," said O'Mara. "I look forward to the opportunities this new task force will provide to work with my legislative colleagues to zero in on the heroin epidemic. We'll be working to determine the most effective combination of law enforcement, awareness and education, and treatment and prevention to try to stop the spread of heroin, better protect our communities and save lives."

A 2012 federal survey on drug use and health reported that the number of people who said they had used heroin in the past 12 months rose from 373,000 in 2007 to 669,000 people in 2012. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has estimated that approximately 23 percent of those who use heroin become dependent on the highly addictive drug.

The new Senate task force is planning public hearings in regions across the state so that members can receive testimony from drug addiction counselors, law enforcement, social services and mental professionals, and other experts about the range of challenges posed by heroin including addiction prevention and treatment options, drug-related crimes, and other community and public safety impacts.

In February, the New York Times reported that the federal Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) heroin seizures in New York State increased 67 percent over the last four years. The DEA's New York office "seized 144 kilograms of heroin, nearly 20 percent of its seizures nationwide, valued at roughly \$43 million."

The task force is being chaired by Senator Phil Boyle (R,C,I-Suffolk County), who chairs the Senate Committee on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse.

O'Mara said that the Senate's one-house budget resolution passed last week proposes \$5 million for increased heroin prevention, treatment, and recovery support services. The resolution also included a measure to increase the penalties for drug dealers by making it a class B felony for anyone to possess 50 or more individual packets of heroin and/or an amount of heroin with an aggregate value of at least \$300.

Some experts have pointed to the enactment of I-STOP, a state law to curb the abuse of prescription opioids and other drugs, as one factor in the dramatic increase in the number of heroin users across New York in recent months. As prescription painkillers became more

difficult to obtain and more expensive when sold illegally, individuals turned towards heroin because it is often cheaper and/or more easily obtained and provides a high similar to prescription opioids.