



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of June 28, 2021 ~ "Opioid Settlement Fund will make a difference in this ongoing crisis"

THOMAS F. O'MARA June 28, 2021

| ISSUE: **BATTLING THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC**



New York State has gained and stands to gain millions upon millions of dollars in opioid settlement funds -- and it's only right that any settlement funds go to provide and expand prevention, education, and treatment programs.

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and

policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, "Opioid Settlement Fund will make a difference in this ongoing crisis"

One of the key actions of this year's legislative session will create an "Opioid Settlement Fund" that will ensure that opioid lawsuit settlement funds received by New York State will be dedicated to opioid prevention, treatment, and recovery programs and services.

It is a piece of legislation that I was proud to co-sponsor, help support throughout the legislative process, and ultimately vote in favor of.

Specifically, the legislation (S7194/A6395) states that "all funds received by the state as the result of a settlement or a judgment in litigation against opioid manufacturers, distributors, dispensers, consultants, or resellers shall be deposited into the opioid settlement fund, and that such funds shall not supplant or replace existing state funding."

In other words, this legislation, in this instance, puts a stop to the long-standing and, in my view, questionable practice of the Governor taking settlement funds and dumping them into the state's general fund to be used for any purpose at all.

What we're saying here is: Not this time. Not when the opioid abuse epidemic that has been ravaging families and communities throughout the past decade – and has cost thousands of lives – continues to demand resources for education and prevention, treatment and recovery. Not when statistics show that between 2010 and 2017, opioid overdose deaths increased by 200% in New York State.

The legislation was approved unanimously by the Senate and Assembly. It must be signed into law by Governor Andrew Cuomo.

Counties all across this state, including right here at home in the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions, have been on the front lines of battling this epidemic.

Upon the legislation's approval, the Executive Director of the New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC), Stephen Acquario, said that it "marks a major turning point in the battle against the opioid epidemic that has been raging through our state and nation, leaving a trail of death, destruction, and heartache, long before the emergence COVID-19. This legislation will pave the way to begin the process of healing and recovery by ensuring that any funds received by the state are used to support drug treatment and prevention efforts."

He went on to rightly commend “counties for their dogged determination to bring these cases forward in search of justice and resources to set their communities on the path to recovery.”

State Attorney General Letitia James, who has helped spearhead the effort to hold opioid manufacturers and distributors accountable, said, “While no amount of money will ever compensate for the thousands who lost their lives or became addicted to opioids across our state, or provide solace to the countless families torn apart by this crisis, this bill ensures funds are used to prevent any future devastation.”

New York State has gained and stands to gain millions upon millions of dollars in opioid settlement funds, with the nation’s most extensive lawsuit just getting underway against Purdue Pharma and other large opioid manufacturers and distributors -- and it’s only right that any settlement funds go to provide and expand prevention, education, and treatment programs.

The legislation’s Senate sponsor, Senator Gustavo Rivera, added, “New York State, like much of the country, has been ravaged by the opioid epidemic even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic... Unfortunately, programs that address the needs of individuals who use drugs, including those providing prevention, harm reduction, mental health, substance use disorder treatment, and housing, have been struggling for years from budget cuts and increased costs. The Opioid Settlement Fund established by this bill will ensure that the monies obtained from pending lawsuits and enforcement actions, filed against those corporations that financially benefited from our country’s opioid epidemic, are rightfully dedicated towards substance use disorder prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction services.”

As far back as 2014, as member of the Senate Task Force on Heroin and Opioid Addiction, I helped conduct regional forums, including in Elmira and Penn Yan, on the burgeoning heroin and opioid crisis. In a series of 14 roundtable discussions held throughout the state, we heard directly from law enforcement, drug addiction counselors, treatment providers, social services and mental health professionals, and other experts – as well as recovering addicts and family members who lost a son or a daughter or a grandchild or another loved one – about the complex range of challenges our communities were facing and how best to address them.

Without fail, even then, it became clear that there was a lack of education and prevention, treatment and recovery programs and services.

The Opioid Settlement Fund would truly begin to provide badly needed resources.

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