



Testimony

of

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**New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

before the

**New York City Council Committee on Public Safety jointly with the**  
**New York City Council Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction**

on

**Addressing the Bronx Opioid Crisis: From Enforcement, to Safe Spaces, to Treatment**

December 3rd, 2018  
250 Broadway, 15<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY

Good morning, Chairs Ayala and Richards, and members of the committees. My name is Dr. Hillary Kunins, and I am Assistant Commissioner of the Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Use Prevention, Care and Treatment at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. I am joined by my colleagues at the NYPD, Deputy Commissioner of Collaborative Policing Susan Hermann and Assistant Chief William Aubrey from the Detective Bureau. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the opioid overdose epidemic, with a particular focus on the Bronx.

As you know, nationally, we are in the midst of a drug overdose epidemic driven by opioids, primarily heroin as well as a potent, synthetic opioid called fentanyl. Between 2015 and 2016, the rate of overdose deaths increased 51 percent in New York City. From 2016 and 2017 the citywide rate of increase slowed to 2 percent. However, there were still almost 1,500 overdose deaths in 2017, the highest number on record. That works out to one New Yorker dying every six hours of an overdose. The vast majority of these overdoses involved an opioid— a total of 82 percent. And in 2017, for the first time, fentanyl was the most common substance, involved in 57 percent of all overdose deaths.

As I indicated, there are some signs of progress. In 2017, there were fewer overdose deaths among Staten Island and Manhattan residents. But, the rate of overdose deaths among Bronx residents continued to increase, with a 9% rise from 2016 to 2017. In 2017, 363 Bronx residents died of overdose, which was the highest among the five boroughs. In particular, the South Bronx neighborhoods of Highbridge-Morrisania and Hunts Point-Mott Haven had overdose death rates more than double the New York City average. If the South Bronx were its own state, it would have the fifth highest overdose death rate in the country.

In response to the city's overdose epidemic, the Administration launched *HealingNYC* in March 2017. Through a more than \$60-million dollar investment, New York City has led the nation in funding and implementing effective public health strategies to address these preventable deaths. *HealingNYC* is now a 13 strategy plan, aiming to prevent opioid misuse and addiction, increase connections to care, prevent overdose deaths, and reduce the supply of dangerous opioids.

Recognizing the South Bronx's outsized burden of fatal drug overdose, last week Mayor de Blasio announced a Bronx Action Plan. Before describing that plan, I want to acknowledge the role in particular of inequities – in race, economic opportunity, and others – in shaping the severity of the Bronx epidemic. And, I want to acknowledge this is not the first drug overdose epidemic the Bronx has seen. There are many root causes of overdose and substance misuse, including too frequently prescribed opioid medications and the emergence of fentanyl in the drug supply. But the root causes of the overdose epidemic, in particular for communities of color and in the Bronx, also include poverty, lack of economic opportunity, trauma, and importantly past drug policies that have not addressed addiction as the health condition it is and which have led to missed opportunities for people to engage in health services.

Now I would like to summarize the \$8 million dollar, four-part plan that will enhance and tailor *HealingNYC* and *ThriveNYC* strategies for the South Bronx.

**The first part of the plan will establish and expand programs to connect people who use drugs to care and services.**

The Health Department recently launched Health Engagement and Assessment Teams (HEAT). In a team consisting of a social worker and a peer advocate, HEAT will accept referrals from first responders, including NYPD, FDNY, and Parks Department staff, to engage and connect with people who have substance use disorders and other mental health conditions. There will be two HEAT teams in the Bronx to support first responders in substance use related calls.

Additionally, the plan will provide funding to three syringe service programs working in the South Bronx. This funding will enable expanded outreach and engagement of people who use drugs in parks and other public places.

The Administration is also expanding programs that focus on reducing risk of overdose and increasing connection to care and treatment. At Health + Hospital's Lincoln Hospital, an addiction consult team, called the CATCH team, will expand the hospital's capacity to provide tailored care to patients with substance use disorders. At BronxCare, the Health Department will expand its Relay program in the South Bronx, bringing it to a third Bronx hospital. Relay deploys Peer Wellness Advocates to emergency departments, 24/7, to provide overdose prevention information, naloxone, and follow-up care to patients after a nonfatal overdose. The Health Department is also expanding access to buprenorphine treatment in primary care settings through our Buprenorphine Nurse Care Manager initiative. Buprenorphine and methadone are the two most effective treatments for opioid addiction, and buprenorphine can be prescribed in primary care settings where many patients prefer to seek care. Under the Bronx Action plan, two newly funded organizations will bring the total number of Bronx Nurse Care Manager sites to eight, nearly a third of the City's 26 sites.

Additionally, we will nearly double capacity to reverse overdoses by distributing 15,000 naloxone kits to Bronx Opioid Overdose Prevention Programs by the end of 2018. Since the launch of *HealingNYC*, over 20,000 naloxone kits have been distributed in Bronx neighborhoods.

And the Health Department's Rapid Assessment and Response team will initiate a new round of engagement in Bronx neighborhoods with high overdose death rates to reach community members at risk who may not already be reached by harm reduction and treatment providers.

**In the second part of the plan, we will expand community partnerships.**

To engage community members in preventing overdose, reducing stigma, and helping connect people to care, we aim to strengthen community partnerships across many community organizations and local leaders, including tenant associations, business groups, faith organizations, and more.

The Administration will use a number of strategies to accomplish this goal. The Health Department is partnering with Radical Health, a Latina-run, South Bronx-based organization that

takes a grassroots, community-organizing approach to improving health. We will also support the newly launched Faith in Harm Reduction initiative, which will engage faith communities in overdose prevention and build capacity to provide educational resources to their communities. In addition, Latinx Thrive will host roundtables with local leaders and NYCHA resident leaders; and *ThriveNYC* will sponsor a Bronx Opioid Awareness Day of Action in January.

I also want to commend the work of the Bronx Opioid Collective, to which City Council has contributed funding. The Bronx Opioid Collective is a consortium of service providers and community organizations convened by Acacia and the Third Avenue Business Improvement District. We will continue to work with this important group, providing technical support, naloxone, and staff to aid with weekly street outreach to people who use drugs, during which time we offer harm reduction services and referrals to health services.

**The third part of the plan seeks to increase public awareness about the dangers of fentanyl and the availability of medications to treat addiction.**

The Health Department will launch a campaign focused on the risk of fentanyl, which is being mixed into illicit drugs, including heroin, cocaine, and crack-cocaine. Because fentanyl is very potent, a person can overdose even after ingesting very small amounts. We will also relaunch our “Living Proof” public awareness campaign that features real New Yorkers, including Bronx residents. In these ads, New Yorkers speak about their own opioid addiction and their treatment with methadone or buprenorphine. Together, these advertisements provide accurate information, spark open conversations about substance misuse and addiction, and decrease stigma associated with its treatment.

**The final and fourth part of the plan responds to community concerns about public drug use and syringe litter.**

In response to community concerns about syringe litter and public injecting in parks in the South Bronx, the Health Department joined with the NYPD, the Departments of Parks and Recreation and Social Services, as well as local CBO’s and Syringe Service Programs to implement a multi-pronged solution. The Parks Department has installed 44 syringe disposal kiosks in 41 parks with the greatest number of unsafely discarded syringes. These specially-designed kiosks include signs that encourage proper syringe disposal and raise awareness of available addiction related services.

The Administration is also expanding its capacity to clean syringe litter. The Parks Department will dedicate six new staff to routinely canvass and clean high-volume litter areas in South Bronx parks. And the Department of Sanitation will address syringe litter in heavily affected areas outside of parks.

I want to especially thank Chair Ayala and Council Member Salamanca, for organizing the walk through of several key blocks in the South Bronx last week. It was helpful for me and the rest of the Administration’s team to see these issues first-hand and to discuss solutions.

I want to also thank the Mayor and First Lady for their unprecedented support for this effort, and Speaker Johnson, Chairs Ayala and Richards and the other members here today for your partnership and voices. Together we will change the course of the opioid overdose epidemic.

We are happy to take your questions.



**New York City Council  
Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction  
And  
Committee on Public Safety**

**Joint Hearing RE: Oversight - Addressing the Bronx Opioid Crisis:  
From Enforcement, to Safe Spaces, to Treatment.**

**December 3, 2018**

**Testimony by:**

Lisa Furst, LMSW, MPH  
Assistant Vice President, Center for Policy, Advocacy and Education  
Vibrant Emotional Health  
(Formerly the Mental Health Association of New York City, Inc.)

Thanks to the New York City Council Committees on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction and Public Safety for providing the opportunity to comment on the issue of the opioid crisis in the Bronx. I am Lisa Furst, Assistant Vice President of the Center for Policy, Advocacy and Education of Vibrant Emotional Health (formerly known as The Mental Health Association of New York City, Inc.). For more than 50 years, our organization has been on the front lines of behavioral health care, and currently provides direct services to New Yorkers with behavioral health needs across the life cycle. We serve youth, parents/caregivers, adults and older adults in our Adolescent Skills Centers, Family Resource Centers, PROS, Supported Housing programs, and our geriatric ACT team, among other programs. In addition, as part of the ThriveNYC initiative, Vibrant Emotional Health administers NYC Well, which provides New Yorkers with 24/7 access to behavioral health services through telephone, text and chat counseling services. Vibrant also administers the statewide OASAS Helpline on behalf of the Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS).

Opioid addiction is a national public health epidemic, and it is particularly concentrated in areas where there is limited economic opportunity, constrained social and civic engagement, and limited access to clinical and psychosocial services. In New York City, certain boroughs, such as the Bronx, have been more deeply affected by opioid addiction than others, indicating a need for targeted interventions to prevent the incidence of addiction as well as to provide access to appropriate substance use treatment services for those who are struggling with addiction, including Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT), among other evidence-based interventions.

Access to treatment is a critical issue, and many Bronx residents struggling with opioid addiction may not be aware of what help is available to them in their communities and how to

engage in services. Data compiled from NYC Well contacts from January – October 2018 indicates that 26 people from the Bronx noted using prescription painkillers, compared to 743 people from the Bronx who indicated alcohol use in the same period (in this case, substance abuse may not have been the primary reason for their contact with NYC Well, but that substance use was indicated during the contacts). In the fourth quarter of FY 2018, only 2% of those contacting NYC Well specifically for substance use problems indicated that prescription painkillers were their drugs of choice, compared to 48% of people indicating misuse of alcohol.

This data points to a potentially disproportionate awareness of NYC Well and its ability to be a service and support for people misusing opioids, compared to those who are misusing alcohol. It also may indicate both lack of awareness of the addictive potential of opioids and the stigma associated with opioid abuse, as these medications are available by prescription and people may feel either that these drugs are not problematic because they are prescribed, or that being addicted to prescription medications is especially embarrassing to acknowledge. Public education is an essential component of access to treatment, and the Bronx should receive targeted public education that addresses stigma and underscores the message that there is help for opioid addiction available and that NYC Well is an always accessible resource for them to receive support and connection to needed care.

NYC Well crisis counselors are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by phone, text and chat, and counselors speak English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Cantonese; people who speak other languages can be served via our translation line. NYC Well crisis counselors are able to assess emotional distress and determine what services are most appropriate for individuals who make contact, and provide information and referral services for substance abuse treatment and mental health services as indicated. Additionally, NYC Well crisis counselors will assess for

more severe concerns and connect people, as needed, to mobile crisis teams or EMS for more emergent crises.

Vibrant Emotional Health is grateful for the New York City Council's leadership and commitment to addressing the behavioral health needs of New York's most vulnerable populations, including those who are struggling with opioid addiction. We look forward to continued work with the Council to continue to make New York City a place where the emotional well-being of all of its residents can flourish.

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