



Testimony

of

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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**

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250 Broadway, 15<sup>th</sup> Floor  
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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 Manger 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.