



Health

**NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE**

Alister F. Martin, MD, MPP

Commissioner

Testimony

of

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New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

before the

New York City Council Committee on Mental Health and Substance Use

On

Syringe Litter Management and Related Support Services in New York City

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New York, NY

Good afternoon, Chair Cabán and members of the Committee. I am Dr. Rebecca Linn Walton, Assistant Commissioner for the Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Use at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (the Health Department). On behalf of Commissioner Martin, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about our efforts to safely collect and dispose of syringe litter, our contracted syringe service providers, and Outreach and Syringe Litter teams that connect individuals to the support services they may need. I am also joined by Assistant Chief Frank Lettera from the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY).

Overdose deaths decreased by 28% in New York City from 2023 to 2024. While this sustained decrease is promising, overdose continues to be a public health emergency and there are substantial inequities in overdose death across demographic and geographic groups in New York City. In particular, overdose deaths remain disproportionately high among Black and Latino New Yorkers, residents of the Bronx, and residents of neighborhoods with very high levels of poverty. The decline in overdose deaths that we have seen reflects persistent but often unseen efforts by community advocates, harm reductionists, and care providers, and follows significant City investments across the substance use continuum of care.

Syringe service providers (SSPs) are a critical component of the City's overdose response strategy and are an invaluable resource for the safe collection and disposal of syringes. SSPs are community-based organizations designated as New York State-licensed Syringe Exchange Programs (SEPs). To fulfill their duties as state-licensed SEPs, SSPs offer access to sterile syringes and safe syringe disposal. Some have dedicated teams to collect and safely dispose of used syringes found in the communities they serve. The Health Department contracts with all 14 SSP organizations in NYC. They provide syringes to reduce community spread of infectious disease, along with a myriad of other essential services. I will refer to this network of 14 community-based organizations as SSPs moving forward.

SSPs also provide a range of health services including referrals to or onsite physical and mental health care; opioid use disorder treatment with buprenorphine; naloxone distribution; overdose education; HIV and hepatitis C testing and counseling; drug treatment counseling; support groups; drop-in centers, and in some cases, Outreach and Syringe Litter teams. Harm reduction services offered by SSPs provide key opportunities for connections to care and work in tandem with other components of the substance use care spectrum, such as treatment and recovery services.

The Health Department remains committed to the safe collection and disposal of syringes. To date in 2026 (January through August), Outreach and Syringe Litter teams collected and safely disposed of more than 46,000 ground syringes, provided syringe disposal education in over 8,200 encounters, distributed over 7,800 naloxone kits, initiated over 18,000 participant engagements, and made more than 8,300 referrals to additional care services.

Thanks to the City Council, the Health Department launched our Community Syringe Redemption Program last spring. This was a novel addition to our layered approach to

addressing syringe litter in parks and other spaces in NYC where complaints are highest. The redemption program is designed to reduce syringe litter by allowing participants to return used syringes to the program for a small financial incentive. This encourages proper disposal and simultaneously serves as a low-threshold engagement opportunity for people who use drugs to be connected to services. This program also refers participants to SSPs, and other services.

Since its launch in March 2025, the Community Syringe Redemption Program has collected 3.5 million syringes and enrolled over 2,400 participants at 8 sites in Queens, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx.

The Health Department recognizes the public safety and quality of life issues associated with syringe litter. This is a growing concern that the Mamdani Administration takes seriously. We are working closely with our partners in the Parks Department, DSNY, and other city agencies to address syringe litter.

DSNY provides needle collection in high need areas, particularly around schools, transit stops, and public spaces. This collection is done during daily needle patrols, responding to 311 complaints, and through interagency encampment cleanups. DSNY services certain hotspots daily or multiple times a week and has collected nearly 40,000 needles so far this year.

Many people use syringes for a range of medical and health needs, and it is important for New Yorkers to know how to properly dispose of needles, and we will use this as an opportunity to educate everyone tuning in. Needles and other sharps should be placed in a sharps container or other leak-proof, puncture-resistant container such as a laundry detergent bottle and sealed and labeled with “Home Sharps – Not For Recycling.” These containers can then be brought to a collection site—a map can be found on DSNY’s website—or discarded as trash. Unfortunately, there has been an increase in the number of Sanitation Workers stuck by needles in recent years. DSNY recently finalized a rule to increase the penalty for improper disposal of needles from \$100 to \$250 to discourage this dangerous practice.

Before I answer your questions, I’d like to briefly discuss the legislation being heard today. Introduction 67 would require the Health Commissioner to establish an ongoing public outreach and education campaign regarding the use and availability of fentanyl test strips.

The Health Department supports this legislation and currently provides extensive public outreach and education on the availability and use of fentanyl test strips. The Department offers regularly scheduled virtual, public trainings twice a month and multiple resources on fentanyl test strips on our website. These resources include an instructional video, brochure, and poster available in multiple languages, and also includes information on locations where the public can access fentanyl test strips.

In 2026 thus far, the Health Department has already distributed over 118,000 fentanyl test strips to community-based providers. More information on our efforts to engage the public and educate individuals around the accessibility of fentanyl test strips is available on NYC Health’s Alcohol and Drug Use Services page.

There are a few points within the bill language that we would like to clarify, and we look forward to discussing the bill further.

The Health Department remains committed to partnership with the Council and other community stakeholders to find more solutions for the safe collection and disposal of syringe litter, and its impact on community quality of life. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.