



Testimony

of

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before the

New York City Council Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction jointly
with the Committee on State and Federal Legislation

on

Introduction 56 - Establishing a nightlife opioid antagonist program

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Good morning, Chairs Lee and Abreu, and members of the Committees on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction, and State and Federal Legislation. I am Dr. Michael McRae, Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner of the Division of Mental Hygiene at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. On behalf of Commissioner Vasan, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on proposed Introduction 56.

First, I want to thank Majority Leader Powers and Councilmember Osse for championing harm reduction approaches to substance use and overdose. We appreciate you bringing attention to this issue and helping to dismantle the stigma around substance use and people who use drugs.

Before discussing the bill, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge that New York City is facing an overdose crisis: 2020 was the deadliest year on record for drug overdoses, both in NYC and nationally. More than 2,000 New Yorkers died of a drug overdose in 2020. This trend continued into the first two quarters of 2021 when there were 1,233 overdose deaths, compared to 965 overdose deaths during the same period in 2020. This equates to one person dying of a drug overdose every four hours in New York City. In response, the Health Department has strengthened our multi-pronged, harm reduction approach to addressing overdose. We continue to work closely with syringe service programs across the city, expand access to effective substance use disorder treatment, and support the implementation of new, evidence-based strategies to prevent overdose—including overdose prevention centers. The Health Department has also ramped up efforts to address the involvement of fentanyl in overdose deaths through public awareness campaigns and fentanyl test strip distribution.

Naloxone distribution is a central piece of the Health Department's strategy to curb the overdose epidemic. Naloxone is a life-saving drug that can reverse an opioid overdose. Our data show that most overdoses occur at someone's home, and we work to equip people who use drugs and their loved ones with naloxone to prevent overdose death.

We aim to make naloxone and other safer use supplies widely available across a variety of community settings, including nightlife settings, like bars and clubs. Since 2018, we have worked closely with the Office of Nightlife (ONL) at the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment to provide trainings and promote the availability of naloxone at nightlife establishments.

In 2018, with help from ONL, we initiated our "Using Cocaine?" initiative, through which we conducted direct outreach to nightlife venues on the Lower East Side to educate staff about the presence of fentanyl in cocaine and the risk of overdose, train staff and patrons to administer naloxone and respond to overdoses, and provide venues with naloxone kits, coasters, and posters with overdose prevention messaging.

This initiative was well-received by nightlife staff, patrons, and community partners, and was expanded to north Brooklyn in 2019. And, in 2021, the Health Department partnered with ONL to hold a special virtual naloxone training for those who work in the nightlife industry as part of the launch of their "Narcan Behind Every Bar" public awareness campaign. Over 250 naloxone kits were mailed to individuals following that training.

And, importantly, any employee of a nightlife establishment can currently reach out to the Health Department—or any opioid overdose prevention program—to get trained in overdose response and receive free naloxone kits. ONL promotes these trainings through this ongoing "Narcan

Behind Every Bar” campaign, with regular webinars, social media posts, and other communications with the thousands of venues they work with, to ensure nightlife establishments are aware of this opportunity, and can join as partners in our collective efforts to combat the opioid crisis.

For everyone here and everyone listening, I want to be clear. Naloxone saves lives: we encourage all New Yorkers who use drugs, or who know someone at risk of an overdose, to get trained in overdose response and have naloxone available. You can visit the naloxone page of our website or call 311 to learn more about where to find naloxone or take one our virtual trainings to receive a free kit in the mail. We appreciate our partner community-based organizations and the Council for their help in promoting these trainings and increasing access to naloxone.

I will now turn to proposed Introduction 56, which would establish a nightlife opioid antagonist program at the Health Department and make naloxone, related trainings, and resources available free of charge to nightlife establishments. The Health Department supports the goal of this legislation to expand access to opioid antagonists and ensure continued coordination with ONL to prevent overdoses in nightlife establishments. We look forward to working with Council on the bill to ensure our shared goals are achieved and New Yorkers continue to have access to this vital and lifesaving resource in these settings.

Thank you for your continued partnership and support for the health and wellbeing of all New Yorkers. I am happy to take your questions.