



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Timothy M. Kennedy

# **Prescription Drug Abuse: Progress in Albany, Washington**

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***Local Advocates headed to Washington to take their movement to national-level.***

***Top state leaders committed to taking action this session.***

***WNY's federal and state representatives fighting to stop the prescription drug abuse epidemic.***

BUFFALO, N.Y. – “We’re making progress toward saving the Michaels of world, toward making a real difference in preventing prescription drug addiction,” said Avi Israel, who along with his wife Julie Israel, founded Save the Michaels of the World – a prescription drug abuse prevention and awareness group named for their son Michael, who took his own life after battling addiction to prescription painkillers.

“But we’re not there yet. We can’t let up. We need to keep fighting,” Mr. Israel added.

At a press conference Friday, the Israels and several local families, who have lost loved ones to prescription drug abuse, discussed the progress they’ve made in Albany and announced efforts to build on momentum in Washington. They were joined by federal and state lawmakers who have been leading the attack against the prescription drug abuse epidemic.

During their most recent trip to Albany, Save the Michaels of the World secured commitments from top state leaders, who indicated that action will be taken in Albany this year to prevent prescription drug abuse. Negotiations are ongoing, but Save the Michaels are building momentum for legislative action this session.

“This week, we had meetings with Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Jim Malatras, a senior policy advisor to Governor Cuomo,” said Mr. Israel. “In each of those meetings, we heard similar commitments from our state’s top leaders. They told us that action would be taken this year, that New York State would pass legislation to prevent addiction and fight the epidemic of prescription drug abuse. We were thrilled to hear them commit their support, and we are confident they will keep their word as they work out the final details. We look forward to the day the Senate and Assembly come together in agreement, and the Governor signs legislation into law.”

Earlier this year, Mr. Israel contacted Congressman Brian Higgins for assistance with scheduling Washington, D.C. meetings to help bring awareness to the issue of prescription drug abuse on a national scale. On Tuesday, May 8, Israel and fellow prescription drug abuse advocates will join Higgins in his Washington, D.C. office for a discussion with high-ranking Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) representatives on strategies for combating the prescription drug abuse epidemic nationwide. The Israels and the other families also have meetings with the entire WNY Federal Delegation as well as Representatives from California.

“Avi and Julie have shown amazing strength despite unthinkable sorrow,” said **Congressman Brian Higgins**. “We need a stop to the alarming prescription drug epidemic locally and nationally to save other families from tragedy. The Israels are amazing champions for this cause and I am honored to join with them as we take this fight to Washington, DC.”

The Western New York State Delegation is lining up in support of reform to prevent prescription drug abuse. Many local state lawmakers have expressed support for **Attorney General Eric Schneiderman’s** proposed legislation, the Internet System for Tracking Over-Prescribing (I-STOP) Act. Several Western New York legislators are supporting the Michael David Israel Laws, which are sponsored by **Senator Tim Kennedy** and **Assemblywoman Crystal Peoples-Stokes**.

“The wrath of the prescription drug abuse epidemic has been felt across the nation and here at home where so many innocent families are falling victim to painkiller addiction,” said **Senator Kennedy**. “Avi, Julie and all of the local family advocates have bravely served as the driving forces behind this reform movement. The State Legislature needs to listen to these grieving families and take action now to fix this broken system before another life is lost and another family has to endure their pain. As the final details of reform legislation are hammered out in Albany, we need to address the concepts we included in the Michael David Israel Laws – physician training, patient information and addiction transition, as well as the real-time reporting system proposed in I-STOP.”

“The prescription drug abuse epidemic is gripping western New York and beyond. We must take firm action to clamp down on those who supply the drugs and increase penalties on those who commit crime in pursuit of them. I look forward to meeting with the Israel family and the members of ‘Save the Michaels of the World’ in DC next week. I thank them for all they have done to push this important issue forward,” said **Senator Charles Schumer**, who has supported funding for interstate, real-time prescription drug databases, called on the Food and Drug Administration to carefully weigh approval of highly addictive substances, and worked with the Drug Enforcement Agency to educate small pharmacies across New York about best practice to prevent hold ups and theft of oxycodone and similar drugs.

“Prescription drug abuse is a troubling epidemic affecting thousands of families across New York State, and we must take real action to address this crisis,” **Senator Kirsten Gillibrand** said. “Tragic stories like that of Michael Israel's are growing far too common, as powerful, addictive prescription drugs are too easily accessed by our children. Effective regulation and monitoring can be a part of the solution, and I applaud the family of Michael Israel for bringing their advocacy efforts to Washington.”

“The number one fear every parent has is losing their child. The Israels have already had to experience this unbearable tragedy, but we can still help save thousands of Western New Yorkers before it’s too late,” said **Congresswoman Kathy Hochul**. “Washington needs to focus on this epidemic, which is rapidly becoming a leading cause of death among young people in this country. The prescription drug epidemic has taken far too many lives and it’s time we finally stand up and fight this addiction.”

"I'm excited about the progress that has been made in Albany and pleased at the commitments by Senator Skelos, Governor Cuomo and Assemblyman Silver that this topic is a priority for this legislative session," said **Senator George D. Maziarz**. "We had an excellent discussion during meetings that I attended with Avi and Julie alongside Senator Skelos and Jim Malatras of the Governor's office, and I am confident that this drug addiction problem is at the top of their agenda. This issue is something that is not going away on its own, so we need to do all that we can to help out individuals and families such as the Israels, to stop prescription drug addiction."

**Senator Patrick M. Gallivan** said, "Prescription drug abuse and addiction has become a public health crisis across the nation and – as the Israel family knows all too well – Western New York is far from immune to its consequences. I was proud to join my Senate colleagues earlier this year to pass a series of new measures targeting prescription drug abuse and the illegal prescription drug trade, but the fight must continue if we are going to save more Michaels of the World. I applaud the Israel family for their passion and their perseverance."

"Prescription drug abuse is becoming an epidemic and it needs to be stopped," **Assemblyman Dennis Gabryszak** said. "The misuse of these drugs has caused far too many tragedies in our area. I will continue to work with my colleagues to see that this important legislation regarding prescription drug abuse reform is enacted."

**Assemblyman Sean Ryan** said, "It takes a great deal of courage for Avi and Julie Israel to keep up this fight, and I am proud to stand with them as they keep up the pressure to stop prescription drug abuse in New York State. It is absolutely imperative that we pass the I-STOP legislation this year, so that we can get the tools in place needed to fight this devastating problem that is affecting every corner of our state."

**Assemblyman Kevin Smardz** said, "I believe there is no greater issue concerning the health of New Yorkers than the dramatic rise in prescription related fatalities and addictions and the lack of accountability that exists in preventing such crisis from growing further. This is an epidemic, not only here in Western New York, but in the Empire State and across the nation and it deserves our immediate action. We have an opportunity to born progress and reform out of tragedy and to ensure that anyone who has lost a child to the grips of addiction has not done so in vain. I will continue to stand alongside those families and do whatever I can to prevent further

prescription drug abuse here at home.”

**Assemblywoman Jane L. Corwin** said, “While the details of the final version of legislation regarding a prescription drug database are still being negotiated, it is important to raise awareness and bring attention to the fact that prescription drug abuse is a rising epidemic, and it is very important that we combat this issue to save lives. I will continue to support, be an advocate for, and work with my colleagues in the State Assembly and Senate to pass significant legislation that will fight against the growing issue of prescription drug abuse.”

“Prescription drug abuse is a scourge on every community across the state that knows no bounds of age, gender or any demographics,” **said Assemblyman Ray Walter**. “Save the Michaels of the World is leading the fight to save lives and protect families from having to battle this devastating problem. With their impassioned advocacy, I know that we can root out prescription drug abuse once and for all, and I will work every day to see that state government does not delay in doing their part.”

**Assemblyman Michael Kearns** said, “It is very important to raise awareness to prevent prescription drug abuse. We need to discourage our youth from starting an addiction that will have a negative impact on their futures, families and communities.”

In January of this year, Congressman Higgins and Congressman Grimm led 22 of their House of Representatives colleagues in sending a letter to New York State legislators urging them to pass Attorney General Eric Schneiderman’s proposed legislation, the Internet System for Tracking Over-Prescribing (I-STOP) Act. New York has long been a leader in advanced medical technology. I-STOP, a state-led program connecting doctors and pharmacists to a real-time, online database to track the prescribing and dispensing of frequently abused drugs, would help New York join the ranks of 43 other states who have modernized their approach to combating prescription drug abuse.

Last fall, Congressman Higgins and Senator Kennedy joined with Avi and Julie Israel and other Western New York advocates to bring attention to the urgent need to fight against the prescription drug epidemic. Higgins has been a vocal advocate for health information technology and electronic medical records, citing the crucial role that advancements in this field, like I-STOP, would have in reducing the incidence of

prescription drug abuse. Additionally, these technologies would be a means for health professionals to better exchange patient information, avoid medical errors and encourage better outcomes.

It was at this event last fall, when Kennedy and the Israel family unveiled the Michael David Israel Laws, which include:

- Patient Information Act: ensures patients are aware of addiction risks for certain narcotic prescriptions, prior to taking them.
- Physician Training Law: relates to continuing medical education requirements for doctors, nurses and pharmacists – requiring training on the prevention, treatment and mitigation of addiction.
- Addiction Transition Law: requires the Dept. of Health to promulgate guidelines to help physicians transition patients from high-risk substances to those with a low risk or other pain management solutions.
- Controlled Substance Registry Reform Act: requires physicians and pharmacists to check a real-time, online registry for indicators of abuse or addiction prior to writing or filling a prescription.

These bills are currently in committee, awaiting a vote.

In 2009, Higgins supported the HITECH Act, which created the Beacon grant program allowing HEALTHeLINK, the Western New York Clinical Exchange, to become a national outlier in the integration of Electronic Medical Records. To date 290,000 patients in 8 Western New York counties have opted into HEALTHeLINK, which enables doctors to communicate with one another and prevent addiction and abuse before it starts. This Congress, Congressman Higgins is a cosponsor of H.R. 1925, the Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, which would provide better educational tools for health professionals and consumers, clinical guidelines for methadone use, and federal support for treatment programs.