

Joint Senate Task Force on Opioids, Addiction, & Overdose Prevention
Public Hearing Testimony

Good morning esteemed Committee Members. My name is Ken Robinson and I am the Executive Director of Research for a Safer New York. Research for a Safer New York is a consortium of harm reduction providers that has been established to oversee a pilot research study in the form of the operation of five Overdose Prevention Centers, or OPCs, in New York State – four in New York City and one in Ithaca. The 24-month pilot study will evaluate the efficacy of OPCs as a crucial strategy to prevent opioid overdose fatalities; reduce public drug use and needle sharing; create a pathway to addiction treatment and recovery; and mitigate the HIV and hepatitis C epidemics.

We must pass the Overdose Prevention Center Act. This bill – Senate bill 5289A and Assembly bill 7813 – is currently in committee in both houses. It does not ask for blanket authorization of Overdose Prevention Centers. It will authorize the previously mentioned 24-month research pilot. The five Overdose Prevention Centers will be paired with well-established harm reduction and syringe exchange programs. Dr. Holly Hagan, a world-renowned epidemiologist at NYU, has already been recruited to conduct the research.

It is very important that all the committee members and the public understand that New York State currently has one of the most extensive syringe exchange networks in the world. The amazing success of syringe exchange programs as a public health intervention is widely known and accepted. However, under current law, when we give someone a clean syringe, we must send them out the door to consume their drugs. Many of these folks are going to go to public restrooms, parks, playgrounds, and alleyways. We are only asking for one small additional step – that we be allowed to offer IV drug users a clean and safe place to consume their drugs, where they will be monitored by staff to prevent overdose, and where they will be offered a pathway to lifesaving services. There is nothing radical or nefarious about this. This is an evidence-based best practice and medical intervention that saves human lives.

Many of you will have heard of the Insite Overdose Prevention Centre in Vancouver, Canada. Insite was the first OPC in North America and is widely viewed as one of the most successful OPCs in the world. On their website, they say that in 2017 they engaged in 1,983 overdose interventions and in that 2018 they engaged in 1,466. On July 31st I had the opportunity to speak with Insite's current director, Elizabeth Holliday. I asked her if she would say that each one of those interventions was a life saved. She replied, quite emphatically, that she knew with a high level of certainty that each of those 3,449 interventions was a human life saved. Think about it. That's 3,449 families that did not have to bury their son, daughter, brother, or sister. 3,449 mothers that didn't have to suffer the crushing grief of burying a child.

I am very saddened to say that one life that was not saved out in Binghamton, New York was the life of Jeff Dugan. Jeff died of a heroin overdose in 2014. I had hoped to introduce you to Jeff's mother, my friend Alexis Pleus, but unfortunately, she had to cancel her trip to join us at the last minute. Alexis channeled her grief, a grief that most of us can only imagine, into founding the extraordinary nonprofit organization Truth Pharm. Alexis did offer me this quote to share with you: "As a mother who's lost her son, I am experienced in contemplating what could have produced a different outcome for Jeff. There are a lot of things that 'might have' helped, but in the end, a safe place to use is the only thing I know for sure that would have." There is a saying that we Advocates use in this campaign to authorize OPCs in New York State: "Dead drug users don't recover." Please think about that. Thank you.

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