



Suffolk County Heroin and Opiate Epidemic Advisory Panel-Meeting Minutes 5-8-2020

Meeting Date: May 8, 2020

Location: Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Next Meeting Date: July 10, 2020

Members in Attendance:

Suffolk County Legislator Sarah Anker, Chair
Suffolk County District Attorney Tim Sini
Suffolk County Dept. of Health Services Commissioner Gregson Pigott
Michael Caplan, Suffolk County Medical Examiner
Linda Guida, Office of Suffolk County Legislator William Spencer
Guy Calla, Office of Suffolk County Legislator Kevin McCaffrey
Colleen McKenna, Office of Suffolk County Sheriff Errol Toulon
Inspector Stan Grodski, Office of Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart
Cari Faith Besserman, Suffolk County Division of Mental Health and Hygiene
Andrea Neubauer, Suffolk County Probation Dept.
Mary Silberstein, Suffolk County Communities of Solution
Steve Chassman, LICADD
Julie Lutz, Suffolk County Superintendents' Association
Pat Policastro, North Shore Youth Council
Richard Rosenthal, Stony Brook University Hospital
Kristie Golden, Stony Brook University Hospital
David Cohen, Eastern Long Island Hospital
Pamela Mizzi, Long Island Prevention Resource Center
John Venza, Outreach House
Antonette Whyte-Etere, NY OASAS Long Island Regional Office
Pat Ferendino, Quality Consortium & Family Service League of Suffolk County
Anthony Rizzuto, FIST
Robert McConville, Selden Fire Department Commissioner

Recorder: Laura Logan, Legislative Aide for Legislator Sarah Anker

I. Welcoming Remarks- Legislator Sarah Anker

II. Pledge

III. Moment of Silence

IV. Panel Member Introductions

V. Updated Statistics – Police Department & Medical Examiner’s Office

Inspector Grodski provided the panel with the police department update. As of Wednesday, May 6, there have been 114 overdoses, compared to 78 to date in 2019. Therefore, drug overdoses have increased a little bit more than 43%. There have been 415 nonfatal cases compared to 357 in 2019. That is a roughly 16% increase. Those two numbers total 519, compared to 435 in 2019, which is a 19% increase in total overdoses. These numbers are preliminary. There aren’t any clusters, they are spread out and most happen on the weekend. The top overdose communities are West Babylon, Coram, Centereach, Medford, and Mastic Beach. Through investigations, the department has found that there is a tightening of supply, and they are concerned about what other substances are being used to stretch out the supply, including counterfeit drugs like fentanyl.

The Medical Examiner reported that there are still 124 pending deaths from 2019. There were 316 total opioid fatalities in 2019, which is a 17% decrease. Dr. Caplan went back and looked at data from up to May 1, 2020 and compared it to May 1, 2019. He noted that we are still seeing a decrease from 2018 to 2019. Dr. Caplan also addressed that anecdotally, his office is seeing at least an increase in nonfatal intoxications. He stated that there have been certain days recently when there have been a lot of combined overdoses and suicides, but the numbers aren’t there yet. As of May 2020, there have been 14 confirmed opioid deaths, and 87 are pending. Dr. Caplan reiterated that drugs go beyond just opioids, and how his office’s numbers lag behind the police department statistics.

VI. Discussion

Steve Chassman stated his concern that they have been seeing more overdoses, suicides, and alcohol abuse amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. John Venza noted that regions across the state are seeing similar trends, and said that we are seeing where the challenges are and need to start putting safety nets. The raw numbers from the police are real, and the anecdotal numbers are real. District Attorney Sini added that the preliminary data from the police department are only called that because they are real numbers. Steve Chassman suggested using the media to help get the word out.

John Venza said another challenge is budget cuts being thrown around statewide. There is going to be a 40% cut across the board for schools, mental health providers, and hospitals. This would annihilate the substance abuse disorders resources. He suggested trying to formulate a call to action to keep the system whole because there is a need for it now more than ever. He asked that when other organizations formulate their letters that the panel agrees to sign on in support.

Richard Rosenthal sent an article to share with the panel that shows a clear increase in fatalities in suicides of those who have drug overdoses showing up in the emergency rooms, not just with opioids. He noted that one can only imagine that during this time, people are getting desperate. Anthony Rizzuto added that this is just the beginning; when we look at the number of people

who have lost their jobs or have had other financial losses, we are going to see a huge spike in the need for behavioral health. Suicide is going to go up with domestic violence. Cuts to budgets will be detrimental, because there will be an increased burden to pay for the consequences. There needs to be increased awareness of resources.

Legislator Anker and District Attorney Sini said there is a possibility for forfeiture money, however there are limitations to how the money can be used. But District Attorney Sini said he would love to know any ideas on how to use the money. He also noted that there is money from 2018 and 2019 to be used for diversion programs.

Kristie Golden added that Stony Brook University Hospital is doing a radio spot on raising awareness. She said she would try to provide this to the panel and legislators. Legislator Anker's office and the panel will be working with Kristie Golden on key points for the state to advocate for continued telehealth services beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

Legislator Anker went over the articles that were given to the panel to review. District Attorney Sini explained that they have active investigations going on despite the pandemic, and explained his office's process of tracking drugs. For example, they are tracking how drugs are being smuggled across the borders, being brought to New York City, and then sold to wholesalers on Long Island. The panel was reminded to promote the Suffolk County 24/7 Drug Hotline: 631-852-NARC (6272).

Steve Chassman noted the correlation of economic downturns and the rise of drug abuse throughout history. District Attorney Sini also noted that polysubstance use will increase, meaning we will see more than one drug being involved in an overdose or death. People who are struggling to obtain their drugs will improvise, resulting in an increased chance of death.

Cari Faith Besserman shared that the Division of Mental Hygiene is working with partnered county providers. There are number of efforts being made to the spread the word on available resources. The county is working on getting money through FEMA. She believes the severity of this issue is being recognized significantly. There is the potential for this crisis to affect everyone, rather than just those who may have been dealing with it before.

Legislator Anker asked the panel to send her office their priorities. She wants to change the process of government to accommodate these emergency situations. Mary Silberstein commented that we need resources in order to reopen clinics and retain the ability to work remotely. LICADD is continuing to do Compassion Fatigue Training for first responders to participate in, especial in relation to COVID-19.

Robert McConville added that call volume at the fire department is down because more people are staying home. However, there has certainly been an increase in domestic violence.

Anthony Rizzuto reiterated that the panel needs to keep up the legislative changes to accommodate telehealth. People will be caught in between getting treatment and protecting their loved ones from the continued threat of the virus. He also echoed the need for compassion fatigue training, and dispersing this information to the public. Mary Silberstein commented on the struggle of mental health within the medical community. Kristie Golden shared that Stony

Brook University Hospital has implemented efforts to help its staff and they have set up a respite area to help the staff take care of themselves during this time. Kristie noted that it has already seen hundreds of visitors. The hospital is also making support groups available to staff virtually three times a day. However, they changed the name to “Daily Meditation,” which increased attendance because they found calling them “support groups” deterred people away. David Cohen said that Eastern Long Island Hospital is doing the same for its staff.

VII. Action Items and Updates

Legislator Anker asked the panel to forward her office any letters being written against budget cuts. District Attorney Sini said he would look into the forfeiture funding for a public service announcement or other resources. Overall, the panel agreed that they will work to get the word out on resources for mental health and substance abuse. Steve Chassman reminded the panel of LICADD’s continued wellness webinars.

Julie Lutz updated the panel on the issues on the frontlines of education during the pandemic. She stated that every call she has with leadership at BOCES echoes the same issues regarding mental health. They are working on providing support for teachers so they can not only take care of themselves, but also better provide support for their students.

Antonette Whyte-Etere updated the panel that the Nassau University Medical Center and the Eastern Long Island Hospital detox and rehab facilities are back online and that the Long Island Center for Recovery is back open, as well. The only one that is still offline as of the beginning of May 2020 is South Oaks Hospital. She also noted that the DASH Center has been crucial in this crisis in relieving the burden on hospitals.

IX. Adjournment