

Please submit this written statement to your Committee hearing testimony related to the Opioid Settlement Abatement Advisory Committee Memorandum of March 10, 2023.

It's with humility and a sense of risk that I speak for the many dear ones taken from us by poly-drug overdose death in Vermont.

I'm compelled to do so by the Opioid Settlement Abatement Advisory Committee process I've been observing.

The final recommendations to the State Legislature, (<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2024/WorkGroups/House%20Appropriations/FY%202024%20Budget/Other%20Presentations/W~Mark%20Levine~Opioid%20Settlement%20Committee%20Funding%20Recommendations~3-14-2023.pdf>), as stated in Dr. Mark Levine's Memorandum of March 10, 2023, are the result of a public health focused process marred by political influence.

I happen to be in recovery from severe drug use disorder, including injection drug use. I know what it's like to inject drugs in public restrooms; be hospitalized multiple times, be incarcerated, and institutionalized; be beaten up by the war on drugs; subjected to multiple coerced treatments. It's truly a wonder I'm alive today, speaking out for the dead. I guess this is where my deep sense of affinity springs from; I am one of *them*.

I actually experienced the cumulative grief amassed by the 28,647 opioid overdose fatalities noted in the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report of 2015, referring to 2014, while researching drug overdose death. The experience knocked me to the floor, has shaped my life ever since. This report, a mere eight years ago, estimated deaths due to illicitly manufactured fentanyl at approximately 3,000. Today that number is well above 70,000 per year.

Add heroin, pharmaceutical opioids, methamphetamine and other stimulants and it's no wonder America is losing one loved one every 4.8 minutes (107,622 in 2021); Vermont losing one loved one every 33 hours (237 in 2022, with 24 pending = potential 261). And there's every reason to predict that 2023 and beyond will continue to reflect our system's inadequate response to this fiasco. I've personally visited the Tenderloin District in San Francisco, the Kensington West District in Philadelphia, and City Hall Park in Burlington. These locations, and hundreds more like them across America are the holding cells for those about to die, the next 107,622 Americans. The next 261 Vermonters.

If you study the Opioid Settlement Funding Recommendations for Fiscal Year 2024 in the above attachment you'll note what appears to be the outcome of a deliberative Committee process focused on public health. What occurred was largely a political process dominated by the current administration's agenda.

The Committee was Chaired by gubernatorial appointee, Dr. Mark Levine, Commissioner of the Vermont Department of Health. The Committee process itself was engineered by agenda to limit the availability of time open to hear expert testimony on innovative interventions such as Overdose Prevention Centers (OPC). Repeated requests to hear expert testimony on an OPC were ignored. The

Committee members were not encouraged to discuss and debate ideas, at times being treated dismissively. At times votes were ignored or miscounted.

Particularly interesting is the mention of Overdose Prevention Centers and the Committee's intent to take testimony in the coming months. Committee members' requests to hear expert testimony on this topic were ignored. Also mentioned is Rhode Island's intent to open Harm Reduction Centers (the equivalent of OPC), while no mention is made of OnPointNYC, the USA's first OPC, fully operating now for 16 months (<https://onpointnyc.org>), with well documented success. (To hear expert testimony on an OPC before the House Committee on Health and Human Services Committee on 2/24: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=n4AsQeLJOik>)

While \$7.3 million of the \$10.3 Opioid Settlement funds are suggested to be spent on worthwhile harm reduction interventions, a full \$3 million+ is left untouched, while Vermonters die of drug overdose, the number of deaths per year consistently increasing - in fact near quintupling since 2010.

\$3 million lying idly, while one of the most immediate and efficacious interventions to save the lives of people with severe drug use disorder is stalled because of political bias. In 2022, by far the deadliest year on record, Governor Scott went so far as to veto a Bill designed to **study** the feasibility of an OPC in Vermont.

Chittenden County has the highest number of overdose deaths per year. The Mayor of Burlington, Miro Weinberger, suggested \$1 million be set aside specifically to support an OPC in Burlington. The Burlington City Council has recently adopted its fourth Resolution also supporting an OPC. The Chittenden County State's Attorney has expressed support. People who use drugs in this area have expressed widespread interest in utilizing an OPC when available.

The funds to support this are being intentionally withheld.

At this point the State Legislature holds the key and has final say in actual FY24 allocations. This is the time for all concerned Vermonters to speak out for those lost to us and those about to die. This is the time for our lawmakers to hear the Committee of the People.

Thank you for listening to me. I speak from the perspective of a person with the lived experience of severe drug use disorder characterized by injection drug use; currently approaching 39 years of recovery; holding both Undergraduate BSW and an MSW Degrees from Fordham University and a Revson Fellowship from Columbia University; a 30 year career in Vermont, dually licensed in Mental Health and Clinical Social Work (retired); the recipient of the 2021 VAMHAR Jack Barry Award for Excellence in Recovery Advocacy; and the Host/Producer of the Addiction Recovery Channel, CCTV VT.

Sincerely,
Ed Baker

Ed Baker ACSW, (Pronouns: he, him)
Host/Producer Addiction Recovery Channel (ARC)
2021 Jack Barry Award for Excellence in Recovery Advocacy
<https://www.cctv.org/watch-tv/series/addiction-recovery-channel> tay