

# Daily Herald

Suburban Chicago's Information Source

## Chicago's increased overdose deaths during COVID crisis point to the need for more treatment



Robert Weiner

Posted 7/16/2020 1:00 AM

By Robert Weiner and Wesam Farah, Guest columnists

According to new data from the American Medical Association, Chicago has seen a marked increase in drug overdose deaths during the COVID-19 epidemic, stemming from the stress, economic anxiety, and loneliness involved in the crisis. The increase points to the need for more treatment.

As former Chicago Mayor Emmanuel Rahm expressed to us vigorously when he and we were at the White House, "Treatment keeps the crime off the streets." This sentiment rings truer than ever in the time of COVID-19 as Chicago's drug overdose rates have soared by more than 100% since last year, with around 924 cases in 2020 so far. Shootings are also up 70%, with May 31 being Chicago's deadliest day in decades.

In addition to the Chicago metropolitan area, the American Medical Association has rung the alarm on several other states and cities, including New York, Milwaukee, and Virginia Beach -- each recording nearly double their normal amount of overdose cases.

While the traditional school of thinking toward the matter leans toward increasing the availability of methadone and naloxone as an effective antidote and increasing first responder training to reduce overdose deaths, this fails to tackle the root cause and is a reactive rather than proactive form of treatment.

To tackle the root cause, we must acknowledge that Chicago's opioid crisis has disproportionately affected the African American community. Targeted efforts should help affected populations through community education events, advertising, addiction centers providing treatment close to affected neighborhoods and schools and better education in predominantly black and minority high schools.

Acknowledging that that exposure to opioids often starts in one's formative years, education and programs in schools can help curb addiction in vulnerable communities. This is in many ways a "long term project," necessary to engender change in future years.

Concentrated school projects in vulnerable areas have led to significant decline in tobacco use once proper schooling measures were enacted -- a 50% drop in California.

However, schooling alone is not sufficient to curb the epidemic. A community centered approach which puts emphasis on social engagement projects for both youth and adults can ensure both parties avoid the isolation, loneliness, and anxiety which often triggers addiction and addictive behavior.

Programs aimed at increasing the availability of naloxone to law enforcement personnel and first responders and enforcement itself against the reckless distribution of opioid drugs must continue. Permanent and real change requires patience. But it works -- we are at a 70% reduction in crack use now compared to the 1960s and '70s. Opiate abuse can be slashed long-term the same way.

When presenting such a plan to a city council or board, this plan may need to be a sort of "six-year plan." Such a timeline may resemble something like this:

- Identify worst affected areas and examine the level of social and community engagement extant in said areas
- Enact a system of programs, support networks, and school education within those communities in order to ensure they are well-informed and are not often isolated, or feel abandoned by their communities.
- Increase financial aid stimulus for individuals and small businesses.
- Create programs based on community-based participatory research -- a methodology that enhances engagement efforts to reduce the misrepresentation and exploitation of researched populations and improves health and well-being through social change and meaningful community engagement.
- Continue the very effective expansion of naloxone now used by police and first responders as a short-term measure to save lives in danger from overdose.

While these measures will not be perfect, immediate solutions to the ongoing opioid crisis, they will help flatten and later lower the curve while establishing lasting community change.

- Robert Weiner is former spokesman for the White House Office of National Drug Policy.
- Wesam Farah is a senior policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change.