



May 2, 2017

Responding To The Heroin Epidemic

At our last West Side Heroin Task Force Town Hall meeting held at Malcolm X College on April 18th, we heard from experts and leaders in the effort to save lives in the current heroin epidemic. Director of the Illinois Department of Public Health, Nirav Shah, MD, JD, made several excellent points that bear repeating. Dr. Shah noted that last year in Illinois, more people died from an opioid drug overdose (due to heroin and prescription opioid pain relievers) than the number of people who died due to all gun-related causes (including homicide, suicide, and accidental shootings). He also noted that more people died from an opioid drug overdose than in motor vehicle accidents. The scope of the problem is huge.

Dr. Shah also drew the comparison between the current opioid or heroin epidemic and the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 90s. Though these epidemics are not completely parallel, it is remarkable that both epidemics were killing about the same number of people a year; that there is a great deal of stigma associated with having HIV or having an opioid use disorder; and that early in both epidemics, there was not enough access to care, and much research was needed to learn the best ways to treat the conditions. Another obvious parallel is how these conditions are really life and death issues for many – so many people in our community know someone who has died or has almost died of an overdose, just like so many people lost loved ones and family members to the HIV epidemic before effective medication treatments were available. And finally, just as in the HIV epidemic, we have had to learn that how we describe people matters – language DOES matter. We don't talk about the AIDS patient – we say the person who is living with HIV, which can be treated. We don't say the heroin addict or junkie or dope fiend – we say the person who has an opioid use disorder that can be treated.

At the Town Hall, we were fortunate to hear words of encouragement and inspiration from Congressman Danny K. Davis and from Assistant House Majority Leader State Representative Mary E. Flowers. We also learned about the Illinois Drug Overdose Prevention programs, Cook County Treatment and Recovery Initiatives, DCFS programs and the Chicago Recovery Alliance (CRA). Dan Bigg, Director of CRA, let us know that all families or community members in contact with people with an opioid use disorder should have Narcan (naloxone) available in their homes or close by so they could possibly save a life by giving the person Narcan in case someone has an overdose. The general public can pick up their own Narcan from CRA (see their website www.anypositivechange.org for where you can pick your free Narcan antidote), and many pharmacies can also use your insurance to pay for the Narcan without a prescription.

We are planning three future events, and some are already well on their way in scheduling. First, we are planning a Community Education event, where everyone can learn about how to use Narcan, and also learn how we can get our friends and loved ones who have an addiction to heroin into effective Medication Assisted Treatment. Medication Assisted Treatment, using medications like methadone or the newer Suboxone or Vivitrol, can be very effective, along with behavioral health treatment, in helping people leave their heroin habit behind.

Second, Dr. Elizabeth Salisbury-Afshar, Medical Director of the Behavioral Health in the Chicago Department of Public Health and an addictions expert, will lead a meeting of doctors and other providers who work in Medication Assisted Treatment to hone their skills as they work with patients in our communities. This meeting will tentatively be held on July 11 at PCC Wellness in Austin. This will be just the start of meetings for providers in the community.

And third, we are planning an Inpatient-Outpatient Collaboration Meeting, so that doctors and providers who are working in the community can also work with the hospitals and other facilities so there is better coordination from inpatient programs to outpatient treatment in our fight for lives in this heroin epidemic.

From the state to the city to our hospitals to our community clinics, we have some great people working hard so eventually we will be able to say that we have made a difference in fighting this heroin epidemic and in saving the lives of our friends, neighbors and family members.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSK', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District