



June 29, 2016

Prince, Fentanyl, Heroin and Hope

According to CNN, toxicology tests for Prince concluded that the great entertainer died on April 21 at the age of 57 from an accidental overdose of the opioid fentanyl, as reported by the Midwest Medical Examiner's Office. Fentanyl, most frequently prescribed by doctors for severe pain related to cancer and other causes of extreme pain, can also be made illicitly. Fentanyl has been blamed for a spike in overdose deaths in the United States, and is 25 to 40 times more potent than heroin and 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine.

When Prince died, the world lost a true musical genius. But we lose many others much too early from overdoses of heroin and fentanyl on the West Side of Chicago, and the recent spike in deaths on our streets has sounded many alarm bells for action. People have told me of people that they know who have died from overdoses because they thought they were using heroin, but it was laced with the much stronger fentanyl. Many addicts are afraid to use heroin because it may be laced, but many often feel like they have no choice because they are truly addicted and they also fear the withdrawal symptoms when they stop using opiates and opioids.

The 2015 National Drug Threat Assessment (NDTA) found that drug overdose deaths are the leading cause of injury death in the United States, ahead of deaths from motor vehicle accidents and firearms. In 2013, more than 46,000 people in the United States died from a drug overdose and more than half of those were caused by prescription painkillers and heroin.

Other 2015 NDTA findings:

- Heroin availability is up across the country, as are abusers, overdoses, and overdose deaths. A just released survey by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) showed a 51% increase between 2013 and 2014 in the number of current heroin users (people who reported using heroin within the last 30 days). Heroin seizure amounts in the U.S. have nearly doubled since 2010, from 2,763 kilograms to 5,013 kilograms in 2014.
- The most common drug of abuse varies in different parts of the country, but heroin is by far the most abused drug in the Midwest.

- Since 2002, prescription drug deaths have outpaced those of cocaine and heroin combined. Abuse of controlled prescription drugs is higher than that of cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, MDMA, and PCP combined.
- Fentanyl has caused more than 700 deaths in the U.S. between late 2013 and early 2015. Fentanyl is sometimes added to heroin batches, or sold by itself as heroin, unknown to the user.

So, what should be done? Many things can be done to decrease the use of heroin and the danger of overdose and death. I was co-sponsor of House Bill 1, the Heroin Crisis Act, which became law in September 2015. This law has many provisions to deal with the crisis. Perhaps one of the most important parts of the bill allows Medicaid to fully cover heroin addiction treatment. This is very important, as state budget cuts have severely affected the ability of providers in the community to treat opiate addiction. The bill also includes addiction services for acute treatment and medically necessary clinical stabilization services in mental health parity. Also, after training, pharmacists are allowed to dispense the opioid antagonist naloxone for immediate treatment of an overdose; first responders to emergencies must have training and access to naloxone to give to people who have overdosed on our streets; and schools must train and have qualified personnel to administer naloxone in the case of overdose. The bill also improves the monitoring of controlled substances prescribed by doctors and other health care providers.

Kathleen Kane-Willis, whose research showed a dramatic decrease in the availability of treatment programs for opiate addiction in Illinois, says that this legislation: “ensures that people have access to all forms of treatment, especially medication-assisted treatment, like methadone and buprenorphine [also known as Suboxone], because that’s what the future’s going to look like. I don’t know that we’ll ever have the treatment capacity on the state-funded side [in Illinois], but on the Medicaid side, with the expansion, we hope that that can make up for some of the decrease in availability in state-funded treatment. This would provide treatment for a lot more people.”

So as we continue to mourn the death of Prince and of friends and family in our city in this recent epidemic of heroin and fentanyl use, we have to show hope that recovery is possible - I hear success stories frequently - and that treatment should become more available for those who want to leave heroin behind them for good. Your doctor or health care provider can assist with finding the needed help.

Sincerely,



La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District