



August 31, 2016

West Side Heroin Task Force

I am happy to write this week's letter in collaboration with Kathryn Kane-Willis, Director of the Illinois Consortium on Drug Policy at Roosevelt University in Chicago. The media has focused quite a bit on the "New Face of Heroin," that is the white, suburban or rural user. Released August 31, 2016, Roosevelt University's study on the impact of heroin on Chicago's West Side paints a different picture than the one that is often portrayed in the media. Chicago's West Side has not been spared from the health consequences of the heroin crisis, which are severe, significant, and mostly silent.

It may come as a surprise that the West Side of Chicago is the epicenter of the health problems related to heroin in the state of Illinois. The Roosevelt study found that nearly one out of four hospitalizations for heroin in the whole state occurred on Chicago's West Side. West Side hospitalizations make up 35% of the Chicago's total, compared to 7% of Chicago's total for the North Side. The rate of heroin overdose deaths in the city of Chicago is much higher than in any other part of the region, including the suburbs. African Americans die at higher rates from heroin overdose than whites do, across the state of Illinois.

The West Side has also experienced unprecedented arrests rates – the number of arrests per population number - for heroin possession. At a time when arrests for heroin possession are declining, East and West Garfield Park's rates have increased. The top 4 areas with the highest rates of possession arrests were all located on Chicago's West Side. For example, West Garfield Park's rate was 20 times the city's rate and 2,000 times the rate of Lincoln Park.

Arresting people is also a terribly expensive way to treat a health problem. Incarcerating individuals costs \$25,000 per year, while jail time costs about \$150 a day. As the state reconsiders its policies regarding both crime reduction, cost savings and reducing prison populations, it is important to recognize that providing treatment, such as methadone or buprenorphine (Suboxone), returns \$12 for every dollar spent. Imprisoning individuals with heroin use disorders, a health condition, is neither cost-effective nor as effective as treatment in the community. Treatment in the community returns significant savings to taxpayers and society in public health and economic savings.

At the same time, capacity for treatment is shrinking across the state, and in the Chicago Metro area treatment capacity has dramatically shrunk by 61% in just five years.

The West Side Heroin Taskforce, in partnership with state Rep. La Shawn K. Ford, Loretto Hospital, Roosevelt University and dozens of others, was formed to determine strategies to reduce the health and criminal justice consequences of heroin use on West Side residents. The Task Force's mission is to ensure that evidenced-based care and health-centered services are delivered throughout the West Side.

The Task Force aims to put in place harm reduction measures in the community like increased access to naloxone, the antidote for heroin overdoses, and increased access of medication-assisted treatment, like buprenorphine (Suboxone). The Task Force would like to see diversion programs created for those who are arrested and addicted. The Task Force will work to create better service delivery, outreach and a robust continuum of care for those who suffer from heroin use disorders in our neighborhoods.

We ask on August 31, 2016, which has been designated International Overdose Awareness Day, that we all remember the West Side's heroin crisis, which is literally hidden in plain sight. We are joining those who have been fighting this fight for years and we will intensify our efforts with all stakeholders on the West Side. We should work so that resources, services and cutting edge programs are directed to our residents. We need to work so we all remember those who have been affected by this epidemic of heroin abuse, and we will join in to partner to create solutions for those most impacted by heroin – Chicago's West Side residents.

Sincerely,

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

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District