



November 15, 2017

Health Care Coverage During Our Heroin Crisis

Last week's As I See It discussed how our heroin crisis is an emergency, especially on the West Side. The title of the column that was published, Sign Up for Health Insurance Today!, didn't exactly match the topic. But, in thinking about it, it is quite true that we could not be doing all we can during the heroin crisis if many people did not have health insurance coverage now. Many more people, especially on the West Side, now have coverage through the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare. This insurance coverage allows people with substance use disorder, or addiction to heroin, to see the doctor to get the treatment that they need to leave heroin behind them. They are able to not only see the doctor but to see a counselor, and to get medications like Suboxone to help their transition away from heroin. They are also able to get the medication naloxone, or Narcan, to save a life by treating someone who has overdosed.

We need to recognize the important role that expanded insurance coverage, especially expanded Medicaid, has played in our fight against this heroin emergency. We need to thank President Obama for the Affordable Care Act, and we need to continue the fight so expanded Medicaid is not taken away. And, people do need go to www.getcoveredillinois.gov to see which health plan is best for them. The website is updated so you can look at all individual plans that are both on and off the exchange. You can also call licensed agents at 866-311-1119 Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. except Thanksgiving Day, and Saturday and Sunday from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

On September 6, 2017, the Governor signed an Executive Order right here on the West Side establishing the Governor's Opioid Overdose Prevention and Intervention Task Force. The Task Force is co-chaired by Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti and Dr. Nirav D. Shah, Director of the Illinois Department of Public Health. The Task Force's job is to look at strategies to prevent expansion of the opioid crisis, treat and promote the recovery of individuals with opioid-use disorder, and reduce the number of opioid overdose deaths.

Lt. Gov. Sanguinetti and Director Shah asked me to join them on the panel on their listening tour, and we have heard stories of pain and anguish as families all over our state are affected by this crisis. Living on the West Side of Chicago, the voices can't be any louder for help.

In the United States, heroin-related deaths more than tripled between 2010 and 2015, with 12,989 heroin deaths in 2015, according to the CDC, with many of the deaths due to fentanyl being mixed into the heroin. According to data from the DEA, the amount of heroin seized each year at the southwest

border of the United States was approximately 500 kg during 2000–2008. This amount quadrupled to 2,196 kg in 2013.

According to a March 2017 CDC report, although prescription opioids were driving the increase in overdose deaths for many years in the United States, more recently, the large increase in overdose deaths has been due mainly to increases in heroin and synthetic opioid (like fentanyl) overdose deaths, not prescription opioids. The available data indicate these increases are largely due to illicitly manufactured fentanyl. So for now, heroin, especially if laced by fentanyl, is actually killing more people than prescription opioids – we have to pay more attention to heroin.

The Chicago Department of Public Health has recently released its October 2017 Epidemiology Report, and it is important reading for everyone on the West Side. This report shows that from 2015 to 2016, there has been a 74% increase in the number of overdose deaths involving opioids, going from 426 deaths to 741 deaths. More than 65% of overdose deaths in 2016 involved heroin. Furthermore, there has been a great increase in the number of people dying of fentanyl overdoses, with more than 56% of overdose deaths in 2016 involving fentanyl. (Some people died of a lethal combination of heroin and fentanyl.) Fentanyl is an extremely powerful substance, 50 times more powerful than heroin, and street heroin on the West Side is often laced with fentanyl to boost its effects, but often with deadly results.

The Chicago Epidemiology Report has more statistics that we need to pay attention to. Though there has been recent emphasis on controlling the prescription of narcotic pills like Norco or Vicodin, only 5% of Chicago's overdose deaths in 2016 were caused by pain reliever pills. People may argue that some people move from prescribed pills to heroin, and that may be true in certain parts of the United States, but it appears that here in Chicago, we primarily have a street heroin problem.

The Report also shows that in Chicago in 2016, the demographics show that 39% of overdose deaths were African American, 25% were White, 17% were Latino, and 3% were Asian.

Heroin has been shipped into areas like the West and South Sides of Chicago for decades, creating addiction, economic havoc, incarceration, and disruption of many lives and families, including people in my own family.

On October 26, 2017 the full Illinois House of Representatives voted in favor of a resolution I introduced, HR 592, to urge Governor Bruce Rauner to declare a Heroin State of Emergency in Illinois.

There is so much heroin in our community that pass-outs are common, where heroin is passed out free to get people addicted and to become regular paying customers. There is so much heroin that even if people want to stop using heroin by going into a Medication Assisted Treatment program with methadone, buprenorphine/naloxone (Suboxone), or naltrexone (Vivitrol) combined with much-needed counseling, they are still offered free heroin in their neighborhood. And, the environment is so saturated with heroin in some areas that it is very hard for some to stay away from using heroin. As one person said, "If you hang around the barbershop long enough, you eventually get a haircut."

It is clearer than ever that we have a heroin crisis, and we must fight to bring help to our communities that are in need. Too many people continue to die, and the heroin crisis is an emergency that we should

fight and defeat now. And, people should make sure that they have signed up for health insurance so they can get the care they need and deserve.

Sincerely,

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

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District