



September 1, 2021

International Overdose Awareness Day

August 31 is the date we commemorate International Overdose Awareness Day. “International Overdose Awareness Day is the world’s largest annual campaign to end overdose, remember without stigma those who have died and acknowledge the grief of the family and friends left behind. Time to Remember. Time to Act.” (www.overdoseday.com)

This year, as in previous years, the West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force, which I co-convened 5 years ago, brought together community partners to bring opioid overdose education and prevention activities to the West Side of Chicago at the corner of Jackson and Pulaski on August 31st. This day was a coordinated effort including more than 40 organizations and community partners participating to address the dire overdose situation on the West Side and to remember the family members and friends who have died from opioid overdoses.

A report just released by Illinois Department of Public Health Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike notes that in 2020, opioid overdose deaths among Illinois residents increased 32.7% from 2,219 deaths in 2019 to 2,944 deaths in 2020, an average of eight Illinois resident deaths per day. These 2,944 deaths represent a number 2.3 times higher than motor vehicle fatalities and 2.2 times higher than homicides. Demographic data shows a continuation of the previously reported racial disparities, with non-Hispanic Black or African American populations continuing to be disproportionately affected by opioids. In Chicago, the [Healthy Chicago 2025](#) report identifies opioid-related overdose deaths as among the top drivers of the 8.8-year life expectancy gap between Black and white Chicagoans.

Additionally, the recent state report notes that synthetic opioids, specifically fentanyl, are the leading cause of fatal drug overdoses statewide and are involved in 84% of opioid fatalities and 70% of all drug fatalities in 2020.

Illinois’ statewide opioid fatality rate in 2020 was 23 deaths per 100,000 capita. The opioid fatality rate in 2020 for Cook County was 31.8, and though the to-be-released opioid fatality rate for the city of Chicago for 2020 is certainly higher than the 2019 rate of 31, we know that for the West Side of Chicago, the opioid fatality rates are unbelievably high. For the community of North Lawndale, for example, the 2020 opioid fatality rate is calculated to be 147 deaths per 100,000, almost 5 times the fatality rate of Chicago as a whole.

We have so much work to do. Coming together during International Overdose Prevention Awareness Day and continuing the street-level outreach that many organizations are doing, including the West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force, can be a start. At the event at Jackson and Pulaski, we had overdose reversal training and distribution of Narcan/naloxone, which everyone should carry or have in their homes; PPE distribution; referral to medication assisted recovery for substance use disorder treatment (several persons were prescribed Suboxone right on site); mental health care; and housing assistance. Haircuts were also provided. Let’s come together to honor those who have died from overdoses by working hard to prevent deaths from overdoses in the future.

Sincerely,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, sweeping initial 'L' followed by a series of connected loops and a final horizontal stroke.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District