

Dear Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Energy and Commerce,,

I write to submit t a statement for the record concerning the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Energy and Commerce legislative hearing on April 14, 2021, entitled "An Epidemic within a Pandemic: Understanding Substance Use and Misuse in America." Thank you for holding such an important hearing

On march 8th of 2021 marked 3 years since I was standing on Elliot Street in Brattleboro and I received a phone call from my nephew, Kaya Siegel's boss at work, letting me know that he had been found dead in the bathroom at work after an overdose. It marked 3 years since I fell to the pavement in a snow storm and experienced the cruelest loss of a child who's upbringing I was a part of. It marked 3 years since I had to call his mama and tell her that her baby had died after a year in recovery. And this was just over 20 years after his papa and my brother, Johnathon Siegel, died also while using Heroin when I was 19 years old. Three years ago on March 7th of 2018, I decided for sure that I would run for Governor of Vermont and the very next day on March 8th of 2018, my family had our world turned upside down by the preventable death of my nephew.

Throughout Kaya's life there were enormous barriers to accessing treatment in Vermont. Providers have to jump hoops to prescribe the life saving medication Buprenorphine and therefore those providers are few and far between. Syringe services are not available in all rural communities and therefor infection and Hepatitis C and HIV grow in our communities. Insurance does not cover all in or out patient treatment and therefor treatment is not always available or accessible. There are more barriers then I can name. Families and individuals struggling are left without the tools that they need to save their loved ones.

Right now Vermont is reaching 3 in 10 people, which means that 70% of people are falling through the cracks in my home state. We saw the depth of the problem in 2020 our preliminary numbers show that deaths increased 38% in Vermont. The numbers will only increase when the number of deaths are finalized. Our neighbors and community members who suffer from Substance Use Disorder make up one of the most vulnerable populations in our country, and they were not meaningfully included in the COVID response. We also saw this with people suffering from Mental Illness. We are in a Pandemic and there is a population whom we had not supported enough over the years and who were not provided the resources to weather this storm. In June of 2020, we learned that there had been a 30% increase in overdose deaths in Vermont, compared to the

previous year. We knew across the country that this crisis, the overdose crisis, was getting worse, we did not act in a way that would have meaningful impact. In 2020 in Vermont more people died due to an Opioid related death, than COVID, yet public health measures for this population were not taken. There are federal actions needed for our states to be able to take those measures.

Among the people who have lost their life since the start of the pandemic, included my life long family friend, Roy Krause, and so many others. Roy Krause had also been in recovery for some time and like so many in this last year, suffered a recurrence and died as a result. It is not a fluke that our loved ones are dying all around us, this is a population who needed more tools to survive and we did not give them to them. Our deaths in 2020 were astronomical across the country. Every life lost is another preventable death. Another family experiencing trauma that they did not have to. Another human being who died because our system failed them. Our system is people made and it can be people fixed.

We have to put harm reduction first. Harm reduction IS COVID relief. It should be included in COVID relief. Harm reduction is what is needed in this moment more than ever. We must have treatment on demand, including medically assisted treatment on demand, dual diagnosis support and criminal justice reform.

It is time to take aim at the systemic barriers to saving lives, meticulously using the science and information available from Lived Experience Experts to restructure how our country responds to this crisis. Federally there is some legislation that will help support this work to heal the crisis. We need to end the ban on federal funds to purchase syringes and other supplies. We must lean away from extending mandatory minimums for Fentanyl and remove the X Waiver.

The MAT act is a bipartisan solution that will which eliminate the redundant and outdated requirement that practitioners apply for a separate waiver through the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to prescribe buprenorphine as well as participate in outdated training. Training that PCPs do not need to prescribe an Opioid like Oxycontin. This barrier means that our children, when they are struggling can not easily access the medication necessary to save their lives. In Vermont some people have to make a three hour round trip every single day to receive treatment. That means if they have children, a job, lack of transportation or a number of other barriers, then they will not be able to get the treatment that

they need. The MAT act puts the decisions about treatment and health care back into the doctor and the patient. It will support more sustained recovery and will make our communities stronger. Most importantly it will save lives.

Additionally, while I understand that it can be tempting to lean in to a mandatory minimum for Fentanyl, it is really harming the same people that you are trying to help. Most often those impacted by this are People Of Color and low income folks that really are struggling with Opioid Use Disorder. They may be being trafficked or left without any tools to access the treatment that they need. The mandatory minimums in fact further criminalizes this health care issue as oppose to moving away from the drug war and toward what science and Lived Experience Experts tell us about this disease.

Finally, I am grateful to see you taking up this important issue. It has been painful as a family member who has lost two loved ones to watch years upon years go by without meaningful legislation that will support the healing of our communities. You have an excellent piece of legislation before you in the MAT Act, that will save lives. That is exactly the right course correction that is needed right now as across the country we see deaths rise so astoundingly. I write you asking you to take action now on this disease because once our family members die, we do not get them back.