

Combating the Heroin Epidemic: Rehabilitation through Education and Employment

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Thesis

In order to combat the Heroin epidemic, New York State heroin rehabilitation centers should be required to provide opportunities for education and career training services, as well as guaranteeing future care, in order to receive funding from the state.

Background & Analysis

For the past fifty years, the United States has had a heroin and opioid abuse problem, but, this problem has turned into an epidemic within the past decade as rates of heroin and opioid abuse have dramatically increased. The Center for Disease Control reported that between 2002 and 2013, “the rate of heroin-related overdose deaths nearly quadrupled,” and in 2013, over 8,200 people died from overdoses.¹ The United States has seen startling increases in heroin and opioid abuse because more people are gaining access and getting addicted to prescription painkillers which eventually leads to heroin use. This easier access to heroin is due to its “increased availability, lower price, and increased purity.”² For example, in 2011, heroin was the most “commonly cited drug among primary drug treatment admissions” in New York State, accounting for almost one-third of all admissions.³ Previous rehabilitation efforts have failed because they have not provided long-term solutions for addicts or have misdirected their resources. Governor Cuomo recently passed legislation to fight the issue which puts an emphasis on educating people about the dangers of heroin and opioid use, setting limits on opioid prescriptions, and increasing access to treatment.⁴ While these efforts are important to making progress on this issue, it is necessary to take immediate action.

Talking Points

- ▶ In 2011, heroin was the most “commonly cited drug among primary drug treatment admissions” in New York State.⁵
- ▶ With the current treatment system, many rehabilitation centers offer little to no post-care treatment, leading to high relapse rates.⁶
- ▶ Heroin addiction is no longer a problem unique to rural communities. The epidemic now effects suburban areas of middle to upper-middle class incomes.⁷
- ▶ Paid employment is one of the most important factors necessary to avoid relapsing.⁸

The Policy Idea

To receive state funding, treatment facilities will include educational courses which teach addicts basic skills necessary for attaining entry-level jobs and will assist addicts in their recovery process. Upon successful completion of their course, users would be offered an entry-level job, and would be assigned a Peer Recovery Coach for at least a year. This job would be contingent on the addict's ability to remain clean. It is important to emphasize long term recovery steps to ensure that addicts do not relapse or risk arrest.

Policy Analysis

By mandating that vocational training services be part of New York State's heroin rehabilitation programs, New York will reduce its relapse rate. Within the current rehab system created by New York's OASAS, a vast majority of patients, whether through inpatient or outpatient services, are offered care as a one-time opportunity, with little emphasis on reintegrating patients back into society after their rehabilitation. Of the 22 rehabilitation programs offered by OASAS, only one offers job skills training.⁹ Studies have shown that unemployment is one of the most important factors in causing relapses, and through in house vocational training programs, New York State would be able to lower its unemployment rate, and lower its relapse rate - improving both its economy and public health.¹⁰ Considering that 79,342 people entered into a New York State rehabilitation program in 2014, rehab facilities could have a vast effect on the entire state.¹¹ Those who are most likely to turn to state rehab facilities are low income individuals without college degrees. This demographic also has the highest unemployment rates in the state, and would be most helped by vocational training.¹² The consequences of not implementing this program cannot be understated. Under the current system, addiction rates have increased every year since 2011, and these rates for New York State are almost four times the national average.¹³ If relapse rates are not lowered, overdose and crime rates will continue to increase, as 65% of addicts commit crimes in order to pay for heroin.¹⁴

Key Facts

- ▶ Heroin use is growing among the young adult population as the rate of heroin use more than doubled among young adults ages 18–25 in the past decade.¹⁵
- ▶ Prescription painkillers is a leading cause of heroin use as 45% of people who used heroin were also addicted to prescription opioid painkillers.¹⁶
- ▶ In 2012, there were 1,848 deaths from drug overdose throughout New York State, an annual increase of 197 (11.9%) from 2008. Deaths from heroin overdoses increased from 215 to 478.¹⁷

NEXT STEPS

This policy should be targeted towards New York State's Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services and the Department of Health as both agencies are responsible for establishing the criteria and standards which rehabilitation facilities need to meet. The OASAS and DOH have an interest not only in treating addicts, but also ensuring that they do not relapse. By requiring facilities to educate addicts and assisting them in their transition into the workforce through job training and appointment of a Peer Recovery Coach, the state can be more confident that former addicts could properly integrate into society. A coalition of families, educators, employers, and nonprofit organizations such as Truth Pharm is necessary for the success of such a policy as all of these groups have an interest in promoting the wellbeing and safety of the New York State community, and those suffering from addiction.

¹ “Today’s Heroin Epidemic,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 7, 2015, accessed November 28, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/heroin/index.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Andrea Stewart - Cousins et al., “New York’s Heroin Addiction Crisis,” The New York State Senate, accessed November 28, 2016, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/02/09/staying-sober-after-treatment-ends/?_r=0.

⁴ “Governor Cuomo Signs Legislation to Combat the Heroin and Opioid Crisis,” New York State, June 27, 2016, accessed December 2, 2016, <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-signs-legislation-combat-heroin-and-opioid-crisis>.

⁵ Andrea Stewart - Cousins et al., “New York’s Heroin Addiction Crisis,” The New York State Senate, accessed November 28, 2016, https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/New%20York%20Heroin%20Epidemic%20Crisis_0.pdf. 2.

⁶ Tina Rosenberg, “Staying Sober After Treatment Ends,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times Company), February 9, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016. http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/02/09/staying-sober-after-treatment-ends/?_r=0.

⁷ Andrea Stewart - Cousins et al., “New York’s Heroin Addiction Crisis,” The New York State Senate, accessed November 28, 2016, https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/New%20York%20Heroin%20Epidemic%20Crisis_0.pdf. 2.

⁸ Dieter Henkel, “Unemployment and Substance Use: A Review of the Literature (1990-2010),” *Current Drug Abuse Reviewse* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2011), 17, accessed November 27, 2016, doi: 10.2174/1874473711104010004.

⁹ “Substance Use Disorder Service Descriptions,” Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, accessed December 1, 2016, https://oasas.ny.gov/hps/state/CD_descriptions.cfm.

¹⁰ Dieter Henkel, “Unemployment and Substance Use: A Review of the Literature (1990-2010),” *Current Drug Abuse Reviewse* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2011), 17, accessed November 27, 2016, doi: 10.2174/1874473711104010004.

¹¹ Thomas DiNapoli, “Prescription Opioid Abuse and Heroin Addiction in New York State,” Office of the New York State Comptroller, June 2016, accessed November 28, 2016, https://www.osc.state.ny.us/press/releases/june16/heroin_and_opioids.pdf.

¹² “Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 4, 2015, accessed December 1, 2016, http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm.

¹³ Thomas DiNapoli, “Prescription Opioid Abuse and Heroin Addiction in New York State,” Office of the New York State Comptroller, June 2016, accessed November 28, 2016, https://www.osc.state.ny.us/press/releases/june16/heroin_and_opioids.pdf.

¹⁴ Fred Akshar, “Speech at Binghamton Blueprint Launch” (Speech, Binghamton, NY, November 14, 2016).

¹⁵ “Today’s Heroin Epidemic,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 7, 2015, accessed November 28, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/heroin/index.html>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Andrea Stewart - Cousins et al., “New York’s Heroin Addiction Crisis,” The New York State Senate, accessed November 28, 2016, https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/New%20York%20Heroin%20Epidemic%20Crisis_0.pdf. 2.