

Ohio Senate Finance Committee

Testimony of:  
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Chairman Oelslager, Ranking Member Skindell, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, my name is Jody Demo-Hodgins and I am the interim director of the Erie-Ottawa Mental Health and Recovery Board. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about the situation in the Ohio when it comes to addiction and prevention.

I could stand here and talk to you about statistics; I could talk to you about the 31 overdose deaths in my two counties in 2015 and how that number is increasing. I could tell you about the many individuals and families I talk to each week who are pleading for help for someone they love.

But instead I want to ask why we can't recognize that addiction is a disease. We know that cancer and diabetes are diseases. We acknowledge that no one chooses leukemia or heart disease. But we persist in thinking that because someone makes the choice to use drugs for the first time that each use after is a choice. Most drug use begins when people are young – from 12 to 20. The median age of initial drug use is 14 and 90% of those who become addicted began their use before the age of 18. This use happens before their prefrontal cortex is fully mature. The use of drugs impedes maturation and their desire to seek pleasure is kicked into overdrive by their lack of brain development, impulsivity and recklessness. And yet, we stigmatize them for the rest of their lives for actions that started a disease in motion.

Using drugs is about stress, trauma, genetic predisposition, mild or serious mental illness, and use at an early age or some combination of these things. It's a disease. A serious disease that is cracking the foundation of this nation, this state and the two counties in which I work.

Until the past few years and the advent of more options for medication assisted treatment, we didn't always do the best job of treating this illness as the disease that it is. We have finally stopped believing that people must hit bottom before we can treat them. We must acknowledge that some drugs of choice - like heroin – require the use of medication that can help reverse the pathology of the disease.

We cannot continue to dismiss 10 percent of our fellow citizens because they are addicted. This is a health care issue that should be a priority for each one of us. We must fight this disease with science as we do with other illnesses.

This problem isn't going to leave us quickly. This battle requires increased treatment access, drug courts, housing, detoxification, peer support and services for children if we really want to win the fight against opiates. We need to attend in a real and interventive way with the children that are biggest victims of the heroin epidemic. We need to address their trauma along with their increased risk to become addicted because of their family history.

Illnesses move into the mainstream only when there has been a scientific discovery or political pressure to do so. Heroin is crippling our communities. The time to do something about this is now. Not tomorrow or next year or the next budget. Now. We have to do something now so we don't lose any more young people like Kim Hamm and Chrystina Carey and Crystal Jolley. So that we don't have to leave any more babies like Jayden and Jazelyn to be raised by grandparents and sisters.

To start, I ask that you maintain the targeted investments in the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' Continuum of Care Line item. The increase of \$27 million/year included in the 336-421 line item is designed to:

- Fund nine (9) withdrawal management/detoxification centers and \$1 million/year;
- Appropriate \$12 million to go to local Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Boards for the purpose of helping people access local services that are not paid for by Medicaid, such as the room and board for residential services, MAT for criminal justice involved individuals, quick response teams, recovery supports, etc.; and
- Fund six (6) mental health crisis stabilization centers at \$1 million/year.

Please let Ohio continue to lead the way with a new focus on addiction as a health crisis. Let us be the ones to create a dialogue about this disease that sweeps across the country. Let Ohio be the state that genuinely supports alcohol and drug prevention programs as a means of stemming the tide of addiction. Please do something. Make some noise.