



Testimony of Jeffrey Hom, MD MPH, Medical Director, Philadelphia Department of Public Health
Division of Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction

House Judiciary Committee

Public Hearing on Overdose Deaths and Fentanyl Test Strips

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Chairman Kauffman, Chairman Briggs and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to provide testimony regarding the legalization of fentanyl test strips in Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia has been and continues to be hit particularly hard by the national crisis of opioid use, addiction, and overdose. In 2020, 1,214 people died from a drug overdose in Philadelphia. While the final toxicology is pending for 2021, we are expecting to see a new record high number of deaths from overdose. In the past five years, we have suffered more than 5,900 fatal drug overdoses. These horrifying figures necessitate the urgent and continuing need to expand public health approaches aimed at minimizing the risks of drug overdoses. Such approaches must include drug checking mechanisms, including fentanyl test strips.

Over 85 percent of all overdose deaths in Philadelphia involve an opioid. Overdose deaths involving fentanyl have increased alarmingly in recent years, from nine deaths in 2012 to 979 in 2020. Fentanyl now contributes to 94 percent of all opioid-related overdose deaths. Philadelphia's overdose death rate leads all large cities in the US and is more than twice that of Phoenix, the city with the second highest rate in the country. Allegheny County's overdose death rate also now exceeds Phoenix's by a large margin.

In addition to these fatalities, every year thousands of individuals experience non-fatal overdoses or other negative consequences of opioid use and addiction, including neonatal abstinence syndrome, skin and soft tissue infections, and bloodborne infections such as HIV and hepatitis C.

We have been fighting heroin use and addiction in Philadelphia for decades. From 2011 through 2015, heroin was the most common drug found in the toxicology of our overdose decedents. Yet by 2020, it was not even among the top five drugs. Fentanyl was the leading drug - present in 979 of 1,214 deaths - followed by cocaine, benzodiazepines, prescription opioids and methamphetamine. Heroin, now largely replaced by fentanyl, was found in just 13 percent of our overdose decedents. Furthermore, the drugs in our toxicology reports are not mutually exclusive. Polysubstance use (in which people consume multiple drugs at the same time, either knowingly or unknowingly) is now the norm, rather than the exception. This expansion of drugs adulterated with fentanyl makes it impossible for anyone to determine when a drug is contaminated unless they use a drug testing tool.

Fentanyl test strips are an important advancement in our drug surveillance and overdose prevention. Understanding the various drugs that people are using and exposed to is important for surveillance and for public health organizations and community partners be able to respond quickly to outbreaks involving “bad batches”.

The illicit drug supply can change very quickly, without notice to street-level dealers or people who use drugs. Indeed, more often than not, neither those selling nor those using drugs actually know what the contents of their drugs are, placing them at even higher risk for overdoses and other adverse effects. With limited knowledge as to what is in the current supply, the public health system is only able to be reactive with its health alerts and surge protocols in response to overdose surges.

Research shows the distribution and use of fentanyl test strips to be an effective intervention against fentanyl overdose. Multiple studies have shown that individuals whose drugs tested positive for fentanyl took precautions to reduce their risk over overdose including using smaller amounts; using at a slower rate; not using alone; and having naloxone on hand. These are important harm reduction steps that people using drugs can take to reduce their risk of a fentanyl overdose.

In a recent survey conducted by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, people who use drugs were asked several questions regarding their current level of confidence in the drugs they are using.

- Only 29% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘I am confident that I know what is in the drugs I am purchasing’
- 64% reported having less confidence in the drugs they are purchasing since COVID began
- When asked ‘How important is knowing what is in your drugs to you?’ 89% reported that it was important or very important

The use of fentanyl test strips as a harm reduction tool can save lives by preventing unintentional overdoses. That is why the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has endorsed fentanyl test strips to reduce drug overdose and allows federal grant programs to use federal funds to purchase them.

The opioid epidemic remains a major public health concern in Philadelphia, where it contributes greatly to premature loss of life and a reduction in life expectancy. Despite the progress that has been made locally in prevention (including a 47 percent reduction in opioid prescriptions since mid-2016); treatment (a 90 percent growth in buprenorphine receipt by MA beneficiaries since 2015); and overdose prevention (with hundreds of thousands of doses of naloxone distributed and administered since 2017); the City is still recording record high numbers of overdose deaths.

We must continue an all-hands-on deck approach to prevent opioid misuse and treat those with opioid use disorder, to decrease the deadly effects of addiction until a sustained recovery is achieved. Importantly, these efforts must include programs and policies that seek to comprehensively respond to the continued overdose crisis.

Laws that promote the availability of naloxone, an overdose reversal drug, help to reduce overdose fatalities, but are only applicable after an overdose has occurred. “Good Samaritan” laws, which provide legal protections to people who report potential overdoses, also help reduce overdose fatalities after an overdose has occurred. Legalizing fentanyl test strips can help prevent overdoses from ever occurring.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I look forward to continuing to work with you to fight the ongoing opioid epidemic.