

Ask Mom How to Save a Life With Naloxone – Gretchen Burns Bergman

The opioid overdose crisis is a global epidemic. In the United States today one person dies every 10 minutes from an overdose. 72,000 people lost their lives to accidental overdose in the U.S. in 2017, which was up from 64,000 deaths in 2016. The number of first time heroin users has increased dramatically – many switching from prescription pain medicines, and the sharpest increase in deaths is from fentanyl.

There is nothing more tragic than young lives being lost unnecessarily, before they have had the chance to reach their full potential. The grief experienced by parents and family members is heightened by the sense of frustration and rage, that this loss could have been prevented. Unfortunately many still don't talk about overdose because of shame and stigma.

I am Gretchen Burns Bergman, executive director and co-founder of A New PATH (Parents for Addiction Treatment & Healing) and Lead organizer of our international Moms United to End the War on Drugs campaign, now in 33 states and 6 countries. We work to end the stigmatization and criminalization of people who use drugs and people who struggle with substance use disorders.

I am also the mother of two sons who have struggled for decades with heroin addiction. They are survivors of a punitive criminal justice system. My older son is a survivor of accidental overdose. I'm lucky that both of my sons found their way to long-term recovery, but they have lost far too many friends to overdose, and I know far too many mothers who have lost a beloved child.

We must stop wasting resources by employing failed drug war tactics to address what is essentially a public health epidemic. PATH promotes therapeutic rather than punitive drug policies.

Moms are suggesting a better way to save lives and we propose five policies to potentially solve the opioid overdose crisis:

First, the government must provide adequate funding to address the epidemic. To this day, despite numerous commissions to discuss the crisis, needed funds haven't been allocated.

Second, we need to have a healthcare system of treatment on demand. The U.S. is behind other countries like Portugal in achieving this despite the obvious need.

Third, we promote and advise therapeutic services, not criminalization and mass incarceration.

Fourth, medication assisted treatment has been proven to be effective in treating addictive illness, so these services should be provided in the community as well as behind bars.

And fifth, community-based harm reduction services must be made widely available. These include syringe exchanges, safe consumption spaces, and most importantly naloxone distribution.

Since 2014 PATH has been conducting community based parent to parent and peer to peer overdose prevention training and naloxone distribution in San Diego County, under a standing order with a local physician. 371 overdoses have been reversed and we've trained over 2000 people through our program.

Naloxone is a safe and effective medicine that quickly reverses an opioid overdose. It is the right and responsibility of everyone who takes opioids, and their family members and friends, to have naloxone readily available. Parents are often the first 1st responders and every moment counts in saving a precious life. With our “Ask Mom How to Save a Life” campaign mothers across the nation are promoting greater awareness about our power to prevent overdose deaths with naloxone. They are training parents to administer it, encouraging physicians to prescribe it and pharmacies to carry it.

Many of the moms leading this campaign have children who struggle with substance use disorders and who were repeatedly incarcerated, or who have died from preventable drug overdoses.

Anyone who has a loved one who struggles with addictive illness, or who has been prescribed narcotic pain medication, should have naloxone easily accessible. The most dangerous time for an accidental overdose is when a person is on a waiting list for treatment or when they are released from jail, prison or rehab, because of lowered tolerance.

Too many people have had their lives cut short unnecessarily and families have had to deal with unbearable pain. Having greater access to naloxone is a positive, proactive step towards ending the opioid overdose epidemic. Adopting strategies that help to reduce the harms associated with drug use and substance use disorders will save lives and heal families.