

Title Hearing & Date

# Committees Involved

Health and Public Safety

# Purpose of the Hearing

To convene experts to provide important information to legislative members and the public about the current state of the opioid crisis both nationally and in California, as well as to provide updates on the status of the various programs and initiatives administered by relevant state departments that are helping to address the opioid crisis

# Summary of the Hearing

Researchers from UCLA presented statistics about rising overdose death rates, highlighting that the rates in California have risen faster than any other state—historically, California had lower rates than any other state—driven by the co-use of fentanyl and stimulants (rather than just fentanyl). Researchers also spoke about emerging drugs and incidences of their abuse. Finally, the researches gave a broad explanation of their evaluation efforts of statewide programs and initiatives to address the opioid crisis.

Public safety experts spoke about current law related to penalties for the sale and distribution of opioids. Experts noted that while California does not have specific laws that charge those who sell fentanyl-laced pills with murder, there are local jurisdictions that have successfully done so using case law, and that many of the enhancements currently on the books can be applied to the sale and distribution of fentanyl. These experts further mentioned that using a criminal justice approach to the opioid crisis is not effective and that a public health approach is more beneficial. One example given was that those who get arrested for these crimes can be diverted to secured residential treatment facilities where they receive treatment for their addictions in conjunction with counseling and other services to begin addressing the root causes of their criminal activity.

Finally, representatives from the Department of Health Care Services and Department of Public Health, as well as a representative from Riverside County’s health system, highlighted the various statewide programs and initiatives, largely funded through federal grants and settlement monies, that help to address the opioid crisis—ranging from harm reduction models, such as the expanded distribution of opioid overdose reversal medications (naloxone), to the expansion of mental health and substance use disorder treatment and related services in both emergency department and incarceration settings, which have historically lacked the availability of these services.

# Important Outcomes from the Hearing

The biggest theme that resonated throughout the hearing is that the opioid crisis needs to be addressed by using a public health approach, rather than increasing penalties and bringing people into the criminal justice system. Some experts gave important historical perspectives on the prioritization of spending on both the national and state level and pointed out that, while spending on public health and other social programs has definitely increased in the last several years, spending on health services still lacks greatly, and we need to build up the state’s infrastructure to ensure that as we begin to divert people from the criminal justice system into health settings that are more apt to assist them we actually have the needed resources—community based clinics, residential treatment beds, workforce—to serve people when they are ready to get help.

# Recommendations & Next Steps

We need to ensure that the policies we advance take a public health approach and continue to remove any remaining barriers that keep people from receiving the care that they need.

Some of the statewide programs and initiatives are being funded through one-time General Fund dollars and grants, and some people have expressed worry about sustaining services for which there is a growing demand. There needs to be a continued commitment to funding the services that have shown to improve the lives of those with behavioral health disorders.