

NNSC HOSTS FILM SCREENING, PANEL ON OPIOID CRISIS

Amidst the deadliest drug epidemic in American history, the [National Network for Safe Communities](#) (NNSC) hosted a documentary film screening and panel discussion on October 2 that highlighted why the opioid crisis is so difficult to stop and shared what actions are being taken in New York City to save lives.

The event featured the Mother Jones short documentary series, [Finding A Fix](#), with a brief introduction by filmmaker Mark Helenowski, and a subsequent panel conversation including New York City council member Stephen Levin, Manhattan Assistant District Attorney Kaitrin Roberts, and community organizer Marilyn Reyes, co-chair of the Peer Network of New York. Mother Jones reporter Julia Lurie also participated on the panel, which was moderated by NNSC Director David Kennedy.

In 2017, drug overdoses claimed an [estimated 72,000 lives](#) in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Of those deaths, more than 49,000 were attributed to opioids. New York City alone recorded around 1,500 overdose deaths last year. The current death rate equals to one New Yorker dying from an overdose every six hours, Roberts said. The availability of Narcan, a nasal spray that can reverse opioid overdose, is often the difference between fatal and non-fatal overdoses, the prosecutor noted. In August 2017, New York became the [first state](#) to make no-cost or lower-cost medicine to reverse opioid overdoses available at pharmacies.

The ongoing drug plague has hit the South Bronx particularly hard, Reyes told the audience, noting that it's a daily occurrence to learn someone died from an overdose. "It breaks my heart," she said.

Reyes, who has been drug free for 22 years, emphasized that harm reduction, not prison, helped her get clean. Her personal experience has inspired the work she and other organizations in the Peer Network of New York are doing in the Bronx. These efforts include handing out 150-200 sandwiches each week and sharing information about detox and harm reduction services (i.e., where to get clean syringes).

Reyes' description of her work garnered a round of applause from the audience. It also made an impact on Levin, a council member who represents District 33 in Brooklyn, who said he would like to see an intensive local response, like the one Reyes described, happen across New York City.

"We should be able to take what you've done over the last 10 weeks and use that as a model to expand to other communities," Levin said to Reyes. The city must leverage its resources—its people, organizations, and infrastructure—to develop an effective, compassionate response to the crisis, the councilman added.

The challenges the opioid crisis poses, in terms of policy questions and answers, differ from the crack epidemic that ravaged New York City in the 1980s and early 1990s, Kennedy said in response to an audience member's question. The reason: Opioid-related deaths are driven by overdoses, whereas crack-related deaths were driven by the crack market, not overdoses.

Basic inquiries into what is driving the opioid crisis and who is driving the crisis in communities—questions whose actions would provide the foundation for active responses—have yet to happen, Kennedy observed. National problems, such as group violence, have proven over time to be much amenable to action when they're unpacked using the NNSC's evidence-based approaches, he said. For this reason, Kennedy expressed optimism that an NNSC focused analysis of the epidemic—one the organization is moving toward doing— could provide similar life-saving benefits.

A grant from the Office for the Advancement of Research at John Jay College provided funding for this event.



Mother Jones reporter Julia Lurie (second from right) speaks during the NNSC's Finding a Fix event on October 2 at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Also pictured from left to right are NYC council member Stephen Levin, community organizer Marilyn Reyes, and Manhattan Assistant District Attorney Kaitrin Roberts.

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