

## Senator Blumenthal's Drug Overdose Roundtable

On June 10<sup>th</sup>, more than 30 experts from various fields joined Senator Dick Blumenthal at Asylum Hill Congregational Church for a roundtable discussion on the most recently escalating crisis of drug overdose deaths. On Sunday June 9<sup>th</sup> when the meeting was announced, it was reported that Hartford had sustained 42 drug related deaths this year.

By the time the meeting started the number was 45. Five of those deaths occurred within a 15-hour period the week prior.

Those attending included Federal and State agency staff as well as



Mayor Bronin who spoke after Senator Blumenthal's introduction. Senator Blumenthal began by making the point that we were not going to arrest our way out of this crisis. Next Mayor Bronin made the point that this recent spike in both overdoses and deaths was unprecedented and would require a corresponding increase in resources to address it. He introduced Interim Chief Thody who began by saying "our focus at the Police Dept. is twofold, beginning with safety and the preservation of life... working with the Fire Dept., EMS and our community partners to get to these incidents quickly so that we can save lives. ... We don't want people being concerned about calling the Police or calling 911... because they may be users themselves. There are laws out there that protect these folks." He then added "Secondly, preserve the evidence... we don't want people thinking that they're going to be arrested ... what this allows us to do is go back and track these drugs and find the batches that contain fentanyl... to warn people."

Sgt. Jeff Morrison of the Major Crimes Division then spoke followed by Detective Steve Citta to fill in statistics on the escalation of the problem beginning in 2017 up to the present.

Peter Canning, an EMS Coordinator and long time paramedic spoke convincingly that for a long time he thought that drug addiction was a moral failing on the part of the addict. He now sees it as a disease that needs to be treated as such. "Rather than saying don't use drugs, when we deal with people who overdose, we have a little handout that tells them where they can get help, where they can get Naloxone and how to use safely." Peter said. He continued "as Mark said" referring to Mark Jenkins Ex Dir of Greater of Hartford Harm Reduction Coalition, " we recognize that people are going to use drugs because drugs work for them and so we want to keep them safe. I would rather have someone use heroin in my sight than doing it in the bushes someplace where they're going to be found dead."

Mark Jenkins, Executive Director of the Greater Hartford Harm Reduction Coalition also said "We really have to take more of a public health approach because we know we can't arrest our way out of this... This is my passion, to keep people alive, ... we're going to advocate to make sure that everybody gets the correct information. ... There are people that I know, that are opioid naïve... our participants went back and checked on individuals and that's how we found two others [that had overdosed]"

One thing is clear, this crisis is going to require a lot more effort, cooperation and understanding to make a difference, and there are a lot of people already working on just that.

More information is available from Senator Blumenthal's office; contact Yanira Rios at [Yanira\\_Rios@blumenthal.senate.gov](mailto:Yanira_Rios@blumenthal.senate.gov)