

As Opioid Rates Plummet, NY Officials Hope 2025 a Turning Point

Six months into the year, health officials say the steep reversal in opioid overdose deaths is cause for celebration. But federal uncertainty looms.

By [Raga Justin](#), Capitol Bureau June 1, 2025



Six months into the year, health officials in New York tout the steep decline in overdose deaths as proof that public health initiatives have had major success. They hope the trend continues.

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ALBANY — Richard Messina experienced numerous painful overdoses before a final one left him dazed on the streets of Schenectady and with a newfound conviction that something had to change.

That overdose two summers ago prompted him to return to Schenectady's Drug Treatment Court, which he'd been attending for months before he had relapsed. The incident "scared the daylights" out of Messina, the 54-year-old Rotterdam resident said, and he enrolled in intensive outpatient treatment while attending the court-sanctioned program. After 30 years of struggling with an opioid addiction, something had finally shifted.

"When I was thoroughly exhausted is when I changed everything," Messina said. "My life twice flashed before me. It's so hard, it's so hurtful to even think about, hurts my heart to know that I've lost so many people, family members, friends. ... But there is a possibility, there is a way out of it."

Messina is one of thousands of New Yorkers who have arduously fought to reach a point of recovery after dealing with substance use disorder. This year, public health officials hope thousands more will join him.

Deaths due to opioid overdoses declined sharply in 2024, offering a glimmer of hope to those on the front lines who have spent decades watching hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers succumb to the dangerous, potent substances that spurred and then worsened the epidemic. Gov. Kathy Hochul's administration recently touted a 32 percent decline in overdoses last year, which she and health officials have attributed to bolstered spending on opioid treatment and prevention measures, as well as a commitment to well-researched public health initiatives that focus on "harm reduction," which emphasizes prevention and working directly with people with opioid addiction to improve their health and overall well-being. Now, halfway into the year, state officials hope 2025 could prove to be a turning point in the years-long overdose epidemic as long as they stick to what's worked so far.

"We don't want stagnation, we don't want reversal. We want to see, by the end of the year, that decline continuing at the same pace," said Dr. David Holtgrave, a policy expert with the state Department of Health. "We have to do the work to address the health disparities that we see, and at the same time, we really have to cherish the fact that there are 2,100 more New Yorkers around the dinner table ... than would otherwise be the case."

But some have also said they remain concerned with the lack of clarity out of Washington, D.C., where a cohesive message and strategy on the drug crisis has yet to emerge from President Donald J. Trump's administration.

Key members of Trump's inner circle have personal stories of addiction and struggles with substance use, including Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Vice President JD Vance, whose personal experiences have helped drive public discourse on drug addiction. Yet the administration has still not fully divulged how it will navigate the funding and messaging for public health initiatives that experts favor.

Instead, Trump has tied the spread of fentanyl to lax border security and vowed to crack down on foreign countries like Mexico and China, which play instrumental roles in the global supply and shipping of the potent synthetic opioid. Trump has made cutting off those illicit drug supply chains a priority.

In February, Trump's administration issued a series of executive orders that "secure our borders, combat drug trafficking organizations (DTOs), and demand reform by source countries from which illicit drugs and precursor chemicals flow into the United States," according to a recently released missive outlining the administration's drug policy priorities from the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

"These executive actions, together with a commitment to educate the American public on the dangers of drug use, prevent drug use before it starts, and provide treatment and recovery support for Americans in need, form the basis of our national drug policy," the missive reads.

Other state officials have worried aloud about the possibility of federal funding cuts that could impact opioid treatment providers, or rollbacks to insurance coverage access that could further decrease the affordability of treatment for those struggling with substance use disorder.

Dr. Chinazo Cunningham, the commissioner of the Office of Addiction Services and Supports, said she is concerned with rhetoric that could shift resources away from prevention, treatment and harm reduction and focus instead on using the criminal justice system to respond to the drug overdose crisis.

"We've tried that approach for decades in this country, and it has failed miserably," Cunningham said. "It's only in the last decade or so that we've shifted our paradigm from a criminal justice approach to a public health approach. If we go back to a criminal justice approach, that will be going backwards."

Still, during his first term in office, Trump issued an early executive order declaring the opioid epidemic was a national health crisis. He also allocated \$1 billion to combat the epidemic, including funding for expanded access to telemedicine services used for drug addiction or mental health treatment, prevention treatment, first responders, prescription drug monitoring and inpatient and recovery programs. He also established a president's commission in 2017 to recommend strategies and policies for combating the crisis.

As Trump's second term unfolds, Cunningham said, New York has chosen to continue doing what health officials say they know works best, aided by \$400 million in opioid settlement funds that have been rolled out to municipalities and state programs all centered on serving people with addictions, including bolstering medication.

The state has expanded the distribution of naloxone kits, which can reverse opioid overdoses. It's sent out thousands of test strips so users can see what's in their drug supply before they ingest them. And it's focused on expanding methadone and other opioid medications within correctional facilities, where inmates have a high risk of overdosing.

Messina, who was in and out of federal, state and county correctional facilities during his decades struggling with addiction, said he had never seen an opportunity to be educated about his recovery and treatment options while incarcerated.

Instead, he said, resources like Narcan, medication and, finally, the court treatment program that was offered to him as an alternative to jail time, were what finally prompted him to break his lifelong, cyclical battle with opioids.

Attending the program, Messina said, was "the first time that I've seen compassion."

"When I first started drug court, I was in there just to not go to prison. And I started coming back," Messina said. "And then I started realizing that these people are putting in more of an effort than me. Love always wins, I believe. And it finally started penetrating."