



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

COSD CLERK OF THE BOARD
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BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 335, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101-2470

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: June 28, 2022

22

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**DECLARING ILLICIT FENTANYL A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS
(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

Accidental overdose deaths caused by fentanyl have reached historic levels across the nation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that over 80,000 overdose deaths caused by fentanyl occurred in 2021 alone. Data from the CDC shows that accidental deaths caused by fentanyl is the number one killer of people between the ages of 18 and 45, far exceeding the number of deaths caused by car accidents, COVID, heart disease, and gun violence within this age group.

In 2021, the United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Office of Field Operations (OFO) seized 6,354 pounds of powder fentanyl at the San Diego County Ports of Entry (POE) San Ysidro, Otay Mesa and Tecate. The balance of the Southwest Border Points of Entry in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas combined seized 3,230 pounds of fentanyl.

Over 66% of all powder fentanyl that was seized along the Southwest Border of Mexico in 2021 occurred in San Diego County. This is a staggering amount of fentanyl that has entered our region, and this is just the amount that has been seized. The Drug Enforcement Agency estimates that it takes two milligrams of fentanyl to kill the average adult. The amount of fentanyl seized in our County/region is enough kill an estimated 1.4 billion individuals. Additionally, this does not include illicit fentanyl pressed into pills.

San Diego County has not been spared from this crisis. The number of people in our community dying from accidental fentanyl overdoses has increased exponentially over the past several years. The San Diego County Medical Examiner reported 33 fentanyl caused deaths in 2016 and the provisional number of fentanyl caused deaths for 2021 exceeds 800, an increase of over 2300% in only five years. Preliminary numbers indicate accidental fentanyl overdose deaths in 2022 will likely exceed those from 2021. The number of fentanyl overdose deaths is far greater than some public health emergencies that have been previously declared. These figures ignore the hundreds

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of individuals who overdose on fentanyl and survive but who suffer long-term physical and mental damage as a result.

While fentanyl is the number one killer of people between the ages of 18 and 45, it is worth noting the increasing threat the drug poses to the youth in our community. In 2021, twelve children under the age of 18 died from an accidental fentanyl overdose in San Diego County according to data received from the San Diego County Medical Examiner. The youngest was only 13 years old. Many more children, some as young as four months of age, have ingested fentanyl carelessly left within reach by parents or caregivers. These children have overdosed but survived due to the quick and informed action of first responders. Poisonings from fentanyl are greatly impacting our already strained emergency departments and, in doing so, further harming our community at large.

The threat to our youth from fentanyl is heightened in this age of social media. Drug dealers have taken to apps like SnapChat, Instagram, and Facebook, marketing what they claim to be legitimate medications such as OxyContin, Percocet, Adderall, and Xanax. These pills are almost always counterfeit, containing none of the actual medication, but possessing often fatal doses of fentanyl, methamphetamine, or other harmful drugs.

Illicit fentanyl is most often found in San Diego County in counterfeit pills and in white powder. While people continue to die in large numbers from counterfeit pills, there has been a significant increase in the number of people dying from fentanyl powder. Users will often intentionally ingest fentanyl powder but there have been a number of cases in San Diego where the user ingested what he or she believed to be methamphetamine or cocaine, but which was either fentanyl or a combination of fentanyl and the intended drug. This mixing of drugs, whether intentional or inadvertent, increases the risk of death to the users.

Also, at a heightened risk of harm from fentanyl are opioid users who abstain for a period, whether as a result of treatment or incarceration. Relapse with fentanyl after a period of sobriety is extremely dangerous given the user's decreased tolerance and the extreme potency of the drug. The need for education regarding the dangers from fentanyl to this group and all others is of paramount importance.

We must continue to address the fentanyl crisis with a holistic approach, which includes never losing sight of the importance of treatment, recovery, and demand reduction. We must continue to deliver and educate San Diego County residents on harm reduction strategies like distributing and administering Naloxone. Prevention and harm reduction should be done as a cross-sector partnership. Supply reduction is integral to a comprehensive approach.

Naloxone is an opioid antagonist, attaching to the opioid receptors in the brain, blocking and removing fentanyl from those same receptors and capable of reversing an otherwise fatal overdose. Survival from an accidental fentanyl overdose is most often attributable to a timely administration of naloxone. The ability to track where and when naloxone is administered by first responders is critically important in order to identify surges in overdose deaths and allow for immediate intervention in the affected communities. To that end, county-wide implementation of ODMAP, a program that would integrate with already established data networks used by first responders and would capture date, time and location data while maintaining patient confidentiality, should be a priority of this board.

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Another data point that compels urgent and comprehensive Board action is a recent DEA laboratory study found that of the seized counterfeit pills containing fentanyl, 4 out of 10 contained a potentially fatal dose of fentanyl. The drug dealers have made dying from an accidental fentanyl overdose easy and convenient, often delivering it right to the buyer's home.

The Board of Supervisors should take swift action to support the declaration of illicit fentanyl as a Public Health Crisis to further elevate awareness among San Diego County residents. Today's action would direct the Chief Administrative Officer to work with the Health and Human Services Agency Director to develop recommendations and an implementation to address the issue of illicit fentanyl as a Public Health Crisis.

The Medical Examiner's office commonly attributes the cause of these overdose deaths as counterfeit Oxycontin, Xanax, Percocet and other pills, that contain fentanyl. At times, these counterfeit pills are combined with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicine made to look like prescription pills and sold illegally. Additionally, street drugs like cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine have also been laced with illicit fentanyl.

Many of those who have overdosed on fentanyl unknowingly consumed drugs laced with illicit fentanyl.

We must continue to address the fentanyl crisis with a holistic approach, which includes never losing sight of the importance of treatment, recovery, and demand reduction. We must continue to deliver and educate San Diego County residents on harm reduction strategies like distributing and administering Naloxone. Prevention and harm reduction should be done as a cross-sector partnership. Supply reduction is an integral to a comprehensive approach.

Today's action would direct the Chief Administrative Officer to work with the Health and Human Services Agency Director and the Public Health Officer to determine the best course of action to declare illicit fentanyl a Public Health Crisis and return to the Board of Supervisors on August 16, 2022.

RECOMMENDATION(S) SUPERVISOR JIM DESMOND, SUPERVISOR TERRA LAWSON-REMER AND DISTRICT ATTORNEY SUMMER STEPHAN

1. Declare illicit fentanyl a public health crisis.
2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to work with the Health and Human Services Agency Director to develop recommendations and an implementation plan to address illicit fentanyl as a Public Health Crisis and return to the Board of Supervisors within 180 days with an update.
3. Direct the CAO to explore and research funding to be used to support a comprehensive approach to fentanyl misuse prevention and harm reduction efforts, including local efforts to check the local drug supply for the presence of fentanyl and reduce its availability.

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EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The County of San Diego is committed to achieving the highest standards in establishing the safest environment for all our residents. Fentanyl is responsible for a disproportionate number of deaths among 18–45-year-old residents of San Diego County. People of all race/ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds can fall victim as Fentanyl does not discriminate. The County has the responsibility to address the importance of this alarming epidemic as it is detrimental to the fabric of our society.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact with this recommendation. Future related recommendations may have fiscal impacts which staff will return to the Board for consideration and approval

BACKGROUND

According to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) website, fentanyl is a synthetic opioid typically used to treat patients with chronic severe pain or severe pain following surgery. Fentanyl is a Schedule II controlled substance that is similar to morphine, but, about 100 times more potent. Under the supervision of a licensed medical professional, fentanyl has a legitimate medical use.

Illicit fentanyl, primarily manufactured in foreign clandestine labs and smuggled into the United States through Mexico, is being distributed across the country and sold on the illegal drug market. Fentanyl is being mixed in with other illicit drugs to increase the potency of the drug, sold as powders and increasingly pressed into pills made to look like legitimate prescription opioids. Because there is no official oversight or quality control, these counterfeit pills often contain lethal doses of fentanyl, with none of the promised drug.

There is significant risk that illegal drugs have been intentionally contaminated with fentanyl. Because of its potency and low cost, drug dealers have been mixing fentanyl with other drugs including heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine, increasing the likelihood of a fatal interaction.

Producing illicit fentanyl is not an exact science. Two milligrams of fentanyl can be lethal depending on a person's body size, tolerance and past usage. DEA analysis has found counterfeit pills ranging from .02 to 5.1 milligrams (more than twice the lethal dose) of fentanyl per tablet. The DEA found that 42% of pills tested for fentanyl contained at least 2 mg of fentanyl, considered a potentially lethal dose. One kilogram of fentanyl has the potential to kill 500,000 people.

While the Board of Supervisors has supported many efforts to address this deadly trend including action by the District Attorney and Health and Human Services to launch an education and prevention campaign- The San Diego Opioid Project- that reached millions of people in San Diego County using social media and other targeted avenues, a more comprehensive strategic plan that can urgently increase prevention and treatment while continuing to support prosecution and accountability of drug dealers and cartels.

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The Board of Supervisors should take swift action to support the declaration of Illicit fentanyl as a Public Health Crisis.

Today's action would direct the Chief Administrative Officer to work with the Health and Human Services Agency Director and the Public Health Officer to determine the best course of action to declare illicit fentanyl a Public Health Crisis.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed action supports the Community Initiative of the County of San Diego's 2022-2027 Strategic Plan by making health, safety and thriving a focus of all policies through internal and external collaboration and pursuing policy and program change for healthy, safe and thriving communities

Respectfully submitted,



JIM DESMOND
Supervisor, 5 District



TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Supervisor, 3 District



SUMMER STEPHAN
District Attorney

ATTACHMENT(S)

N/A