

Families rise up against fentanyl in Raleigh



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Aug. 22—RALEIGH — Each year, the number of fentanyl deaths in North Carolina — from 442 in 2016 to 3,163 in 2021, according to the N.C. Office of Chief Medical Examiner.



Some citizens have begun to rise up against fentanyl. Organizations from across the state gathered in Raleigh to commemorate the first annual National Fentanyl Awareness and Prevention Day on Sunday, Aug. 21, in an event called the "Rise Up Rally," said organizer Patricia Drewes.

"It's part of Facing Fentanyl and that's what we're saying too. We're facing fentanyl," the Oxford activist said. "Because our government's not facing it, you never hear our president even mention the word fentanyl. It's pouring across our southern borders — as of March, we've already confiscated enough fentanyl crossing our southern border to kill every single American, every single one of us. Something has to go."

Drewes co-founded Forgotten Victims of Vance, Granville, Franklin and Warren counties, an organization that seeks to raise awareness of fentanyl and its dangers as well as seek justice for victims of fentanyl overdose, or "poisoning" as they prefer to call it, as many people who die as a result of fentanyl had never meant to take it.

Other drugs, like heroin, can be laced with fentanyl, and without laboratory testing it can be impossible to tell.

"I'd like to see the borders closed," Drewes continued. "I'd like to see stiffer penalties for these people smuggling fentanyl poison across our borders, I'd like to see dealers charged with stiffer penalties. I would like to see the death by distribution, which is the law here in the state of North Carolina, enforced more than it is."

Drewes organized the event and, according to fellow activist Barb Walsh, brought the various members together in the first place and said "fentanyl" out loud without fear of judgment. Forgotten Victims provides "camaraderie with the other moms that have lost their children," co-founder Nancy Ellington said.

Ellington has experience with the deadly drug, like many in her organization. Her son, Martin Ellington, died in Vance County as a result of fentanyl when he was 37.

"He was a great kid, he was very loved, very well liked," Nancy Ellington said. "He worked full time, he had everything going for him. And then, the fentanyl. He had substance-use disorder before that for many years. He ... this is hard. I just loved him so much and I miss him so much. He was my only child."

"Look at these people, look at all these banners," Ellington continued. "This is just a few banners, this is just an inkling of the children that have lost their lives all over the United States."

One of those other victims is Sophia Walsh, who died "of fentanyl poisoning just over a year ago," her father, Mike Walsh, said.

"It's not something you ever expect to deal with as a parent," her father, Mike Walsh, said. "So, it's been a big strain on our family. You know, we miss her every day. So, we're trying to raise awareness so other families don't have to go through what we've been going through for the last year."

"Nothing we can do will bring our daughter back," Mike Walsh continued. "So, what we're trying to do is raise awareness so other people realize the dangers and how pervasive fentanyl is, and how little it takes to kill somebody. I mean, minuscule amounts are toxic."

Drewes pointed out a chart with a lethal dose of fentanyl — a pile the fraction of a size of a penny.

Sophia Walsh's death, which occurred in Watauga County, is under investigation, said Barb Walsh, her mother.

"We feel fortunate that there is an investigation," Barb Walsh said. "Most families don't get that far."

She presented data sourced from the N.C. State Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics and Death Certificate Data as well as analysis from the N.C. Division of Public Health. In Vance County, of 36 drug toxicity deaths in 2020 and 2021, 28 involved fentanyl. There have been zero death by distribution charges. Death by distribution refers to a still-new state law that imposes criminal penalties on those who sell drugs that result in a death.

Granville and Warren are similar — 27 fentanyl involved deaths out of 35 drug toxicity deaths and 11 fentanyl involved deaths out of 14 drug toxicity deaths respectively. There have been zero death by distribution charges in either county.

Why? Barb Walsh believes the answer lies in stigma.

"Near as I can tell, there is a stigma against people who use illicit drugs or they think they're people who use illicit drugs," she said. "And as a result, there are some law enforcement that have a belief that — you do drugs? So what. You know what you were doing and maybe you deserve to die."

"There's a lot of different things law enforcement can do that they're not doing," Drewes said.

Drewes cited Randolph County's procedure — law enforcement immediately confiscates phones at the scene of a drug death because "it's not always the victim that acquired those illegal drugs," she said. They conduct interviews with all bystanders and check for where those phones have pinged.

"We would like to see bonds raised for drug dealers, we would like to see laws changed. We're dealing with '80s crack laws and it's 2022. We also want the government to realize what an issue this is. And, we also want that border closed, first of all," Nancy Ellington said.

"We'd like to see some consistency in how law enforcement looks into a death like our daughter's," Mike Walsh said, "because the state of North Carolina doesn't have a standard protocol or anything like that, every county kinda does its own thing and some do a lot more than others. We would like to see people who have "tainted or poisoned other people actually get prosecuted for it."

"I'd like to see the borders closed," Drewes said. "I'd like to see stiffer penalties for these people smuggling fentanyl poison across our borders, I'd like to see dealers charged with stiffer penalties. I would like to see the death by distribution, which is the law here in the state of North Carolina, enforced more than it is. We need a statewide protocol, is what we need. We need to have a mandate that everyone must follow."

Drewes suggested law enforcement be required to have Naloxone, a substance which can reverse an opioid overdose, on their person at all times in the case of an overdose or poisoning so that the victim can be treated quicker.

She has spent much of the last three years working as an activist — three years ago, she lost her own daughter, Heaven Leigh Nelson, to the drug.

"That was my only child. They messed with the wrong momma's child," Drewes said.

"That was my world, that was my everything. And no, I'm not going to let that go... is it fair, that because our children are dying in Vance, Granville, Warren or Person county that we not get justice? No, that's not fair."

"I'm not pointing the finger at our DA, I'm really not," Drewes continued. "Like I said, it actually comes from the sheriff's department, they're the ones that have to do the proper investigations. It falls upon them and I don't feel that they are."

Forgotten Victims is not the only organization fighting against fentanyl. Walsh is planning on founding a grassroots organization called Fentanyl Victims of North Carolina, which will be a resource and database for those who lose loved ones to the drug.

Wendy Thomas, another activist present on Sunday, founded Matthew's Voice after her son, Matthew Thomas, died. He took what he believed to be a Percocet, but it "was pure fentanyl," Wendy Thomas said. Once a third-grade teacher, Thomas now educates children on fentanyl through her organization.

Drewes is planning another rally in front of the White House in September. She collects obituaries of fentanyl victims across the country and plans on "putting them in a box, I'm gonna send them as certified mail to Joe Biden."

The activist has also published a book, "Death of America's Future: China's Fentanyl," which consists of around 60 stories from mothers of fentanyl victims. Each story explores the victim's past, their death and whether they received justice.

"The way that we feel, we've already lost our children," Drewes said. "The last thing we can give our child, other than that beautiful funeral that we had to do, is justice."