

Families devastated by fentanyl deaths rally near the White House

By [Meryl Kornfield](#)

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April Babcock and Virginia Krieger both lost children to the powerful synthetic opioid fentanyl and have pleaded with lawmakers and officials to ramp up enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border to stop the flow of illicit drugs.

On Saturday, the mothers built a kind of wall.

Fifty banners stretched for about 400 feet, nearly spanning the width of the National Mall. They featured faces of nearly 3,500 people who lost their lives to fentanyl. Many were young, even teenagers. Some wore their high school jerseys or graduation caps. They smiled, forever frozen in time on the banners, which Babcock said represented the thousands of people who have died of opioid use.

Babcock lost two of her own sons to the drug in 2015 and 2019. She, along with about 400 others, marched to the White House to demand that the government put forth a greater effort to promote public understanding of the synthetic opioid that is 50 times more powerful than heroin.

In 2021, more than 71,000 people died of synthetic opioid overdoses, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The mothers' group, Lost Voices of Fentanyl, which has more than 19,000 members on Facebook, argues that the Biden administration has not done enough to stop fentanyl from being brought across the border, or to raise awareness of its dangers.

The parents are calling for more attention to be devoted to a health crisis that has persisted in America for far longer than the coronavirus.

"We want a covid-like response to fentanyl," Babcock said, adding that grief stricken parents should not need to be "standing on street corners, having to hold rallies and carry signs."

In addition, the group is demanding the Biden administration classify fentanyl as a weapon of mass destruction and designate drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations.

On Wednesday, a bipartisan group of 18 state attorneys general, led by Florida's Ashley Moody (R) and Connecticut's William Tong (D), joined that call, writing to Biden to also request the weapon of mass destruction classification and warn of the dangers that would be posed if fentanyl gets into the hands of an enemy of the United States.

In response to questions from The Washington Post about the group's demands, Rahul Gupta, the director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, said in a statement that beating the overdose epidemic is "a top priority" for Biden.

"We are laser-focused on immediate actions that will save American lives quickly," Gupta said. "We're taking decisive steps to reduce the supply of illicit fentanyl, increase prevention efforts, and provide law enforcement and public health officials on the front lines with the resources they need."

The Biden administration is asking Congress for \$42.5 billion, a \$3.2 billion increase over this year, for drug control programs. The White House has pushed for greater efforts in harm reduction — the practice of providing overdose reversal naloxone, clean needles, fentanyl testing strips and other tools to limit death and injury caused by drug use.

It has also taken a series of steps to rein in supply. In April, it announced \$275 million to disrupt drug trafficking through law enforcement programs. Drug seizures under Biden are up, with Customs and Border Protection seizing an average of more than 800 pounds of fentanyl a month in 2021.

Supporters of the administration's efforts say that a multipronged effort is required, but Babcock and Krieger said that attention paid to reducing the harms of drug use would be better spent cutting off supply.

Republicans have claimed that lax border security has allowed deadly drugs to reach American communities.

Lost Voices of Fentanyl does not speak for everyone who has lost a loved one to fentanyl — at a time when the drug has seeped into urban and rural communities across the country, leaving virtually nowhere untouched.

Ed Ternan, who runs the nonprofit Song for Charlie, named after his 22-year-old son who was killed by a pressed pill in college that turned out to be fentanyl, said he is not part of the group and did not attend the rally. While he supports the effort to hit the streets of D.C. and build awareness, he believes the administration is taking the right steps to address fentanyl.

"It's a complicated, multifaceted issue," he said. "But I think the administration is sincerely trying to get their arms around it. It's just going to take more time than some of us want."

Frustration was evident Saturday as a group of parents gathered in front of the White House, shouting that Biden should "wake up." Using a megaphone, each person announced the names of their lost loved ones. At 1 p.m., they held a moment of silence and the one-block stretch on Pennsylvania Avenue fell quiet.

Biden was in transit during the event, heading to the United Kingdom for the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II.

People in the crowd had come from across the country, many traveling thousands of miles.

Marissa Caballero flew from Arizona with a homemade sign saying, "It's not safe to be a teenager in America."

Fentanyl, the leading cause of death for Americans ages 18 to 45, claimed her 15-year-old son, Issaiah Gonzales, in January 2021. Issaiah, who played football in high school with dreams of becoming a professional player, took a pill at a friend's house and then passed out, she said. An hour passed before 911 was called, she said, and he died that night.

Lost Voices of Fentanyl says the word “overdose” is no longer accurate when describing what is happening when people are unwittingly taking a deadly drug they have little or no tolerance to. Their loved ones were poisoned, they say.

“He wasn’t a drug addict,” Caballero said. “He was deceived. He was poisoned.”