

# Anti-fentanyl groups with local ties rally in Washington

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**Tyler Davis, Henderson (N.C.) Daily Dispatch**

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Sep. 21—WASHINGTON, D.C. — Patricia Drewes joined anti-fentanyl advocates from across the country Saturday to demand greater effort from the federal government in addressing the ongoing fentanyl crisis.

Drewes co-founded Forgotten Victims of Vance, Granville, Franklin and Warren Counties, which last month held a similar rally in Raleigh.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid. An amount smaller than a penny can kill.

Many people who died from fentanyl overdose, advocates say, had thought they were taking another drug. Fentanyl can be pressed into other drugs and without testing, it can be impossible to tell whether a given sample of a drug has it. For that reason, Drewes and other advocates refer to fentanyl deaths as poisonings.

Synthetic opioids other than methadone, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, account for 82.3% of opioid-related deaths. About 71,000 people died as a result of fentanyl, out of about 108,000 drug-related deaths.

Virginia Krieger and April Babcock both lost children to fentanyl, like many of those in attendance at Saturday's rally. They turned their grief into action, founding Lost Voices of Fentanyl, a nationwide organization that seeks to stop fentanyl deaths through education and prevention.

The rally-goers met on the National Mall, halfway between the Capitol and the Washington Monument. There, they constructed monuments of their own: a wall of the faces of fentanyl victims as wide as the Mall itself.

"So what started off as a group for a single rally has turned into a movement," Krieger said, "a movement made up of families, 300 more every week. Losing our loved ones to fentanyl causes ... We are losing people, 300 every single day. That's the equivalent of a full-size jet liner going down in this country and nobody is paying attention."

"Then we realized, our children aren't overdosing," Krieger continued. "But nobody is asking us, nobody has come to us and asked us how our children died. How can anybody fix a problem if they don't know what the problem is? They make assumptions. They judge us. They tell us that we're bad parents. They tell us our kids had problems and they don't know any of those things."

"But is it really [our children's] fault? No. It's the fault of this administration who has failed to educate the public about the nature of this crisis," Krieger said.

Her and others expressed their frustration outside the White House, where each attendee said the name of a lost loved one before a moment of silence.



The White House plans to combat drug addiction by focusing on harm reduction — increasing the availability of Narcan and test strips, which are used to reverse opioid overdoses and test for fentanyl, respectively.



But, that's not enough for some "because we can't harm-reduction our way out of a crisis," Babcock said, "we can't Narcan our way out of a crisis."



"We want the COVID-like response to come from this administration," she said.

One of their demands was tightened border security.

"When I go to the airport to board a flight I have to pass through X-ray," Drewes said. "Why do we not have the same technology at our ports of entry to X-ray every vehicle that enters into the United States? Build the wall! Keep our children safe! We are sick of funerals!"

"This isn't a red or blue issue. This isn't about left or right. This is about family," Krieger said. "And we're going to stand up for our families and we're going to demand action."

For some, the rally at times became too political. During the demonstration outside the White House the crowd began chanting "Joe Biden has got to go," sparking a brief argument between the protester leading the chant and two attendees, Rosalynd Pettaway-Waddy and Tracy Poteat.

"This is about the kids dying of fentanyl. It's not a political rally," Pettaway-Waddy said. "We understand about the borders being closed and stuff, but this is not about our president. This is about our kids dying of fentanyl."

At home, Drewes has pushed for more enforcement of North Carolina's death by distribution laws, which penalize those who distribute drugs that result in deaths.

Cathy and Robb Xander came to the rally from Illinois. Cathy lost her son to fentanyl when he was 22.

"We have decided to get boots on the ground and since 2016," Cathy Xander said, "we have been nonstop trying to bring awareness about fentanyl, and nobody wants to hear about it."

"Just like most of us did that stupid things in high school, now if you do a stupid thing, you're dead. I think it's unacceptable," attendee Robb Xander said.

One attendee, Chris Cranmer, performed original music centered on the fentanyl crisis.

"I've lost quite a few friends from fentanyl poisoning," Cranmer said. "Recently, too, in the last six months. I'm a fentanyl survivor."

Tim Grace, who led the crowd in chants during the march, came with Cranmer to support him in his first live performance.

"I lost two of my folks — close, close friends, to fentanyl overdose," Grace said. "They were like brothers of mine. We lived across the street, kinda grew up together, you know. I'm also a recovering

addict, so you see it every day. Like, we're in the trenches.



"It's like nothing I've ever seen."

