

Local activist appears at Raleigh anti-fentanyl event



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

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Jan. 23—RALEIGH — A number of activists from across the country met in Raleigh on Saturday for an event meant to raise awareness of fentanyl, including Oxford's Patricia Drewes.



"Children are going to experiment [with drugs], but they should not have to pay for that experiment with their lives," Drewes said. "And that's what is happening. That's what is happening in this country ... Our children are being murdered, and poisoned in broad open daylight on American soil. And something has to be done.

"And if it takes us moms getting together and doing whatever we have to do, then so be it."

Drewes lost her daughter, Heaven Leigh Nelson, to fentanyl on Jan. 28, 2019.

Activists like Drewes seek to end deaths caused by fentanyl through various means. On the legislative level, they want to see further enforcement of death by distribution laws and for law enforcement to carry Narcan, a drug that can reverse opioid overdoses.

Educating young people on the risks of fentanyl is another goal of theirs.

Activists don't call fentanyl deaths overdoses, as many people who take fentanyl don't realize they're doing so, as the drug is often pressed into counterfeit pills or other drugs. They call them poisonings, and want others to do the same.

Fentanyl can take away any chance of recovery from substance abuse disorder. However, not all people who die from fentanyl were struggling with an addiction to drugs.

Many advocates blame the current federal administration for inaction in the crisis, which has led to some occasional friction between members of the movement.

Saturday's event was to "raise awareness to fentanyl in our communities around the world," said organizer Missy Duff.

"And me, especially, as an African American woman, I need the African American community to stand up and let people know that this is happening to us," Duff continued. "We're the hardest hit, but we're the least [likely] ones to say anything. And that's not right. Our kids' lives matter too. Why are we being silent? You don't have to be ashamed. You don't have to be silent.

"Come stand with me. We have to make a difference. We have to expose fentanyl."

Duff lost her daughter Machiko Duff to the drug on Jan. 26, 2022. The detective investigating her death spoke at the event.

Chualo Truesdell, a special agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration's division in Atlanta, appeared at the event and offered support to the movement.



"I think you all need to understand that it comes from the top, from our administrator, who is doing a marvelous job as administrator, to support you all," Truesdell said. "I have never seen a drug as damaging as illicit fentanyl."



He held up a wrapped box meant to represent 2.2 pounds of an illicit drug and said if it were fentanyl, it could kill 500,000 people.



One activist, Barbara Walsh, said the support from the DEA "feels great." She and other activists traveled to Atlanta for a DEA Family Summit focused on the crisis, the first of its kind. Since then, more summits have been held "in every state across the nation."

Walsh equated the anti-fentanyl movement to Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, an organization that pushed for increased punishment of drunk drivers and for the national drinking age to be changed to 21. The organization says that drunk driving has been cut in half since it was founded in 1980.

"Those [anti-drunk driving] laws came to the [U.S. House of Representatives] because people were passionate about losing a loved one to drunk driving. And I think this is the same," Walsh said.

She did note that part of the strategy is "making noise at the county level" by showing officials the number of people dying from fentanyl.

Walsh believes the anti-fentanyl movement can be as successful as MADD — thanks to activists like Missy Duff, April Babcock and Drewes.

"It has to happen," Walsh said. "I just don't know how soon."