

## 'Something's gotta be done.' Grieving father sounds alarm on North Carolina's fentanyl crisis



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Friday, June 30, 2023 6:52PM



CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (WTVD) -- Scott Zimmerman and his family in Chapel Hill are devastated.

He'd rather not share the agonizing story of his oldest son's sudden and shocking death, but he's doing it.

Zimmerman wants to shed light on a huge problem in North Carolina's fight against the deadly, illicit drug, fentanyl. It leaves dealers on the streets longer and loved ones waiting for justice.

### *The last call*

The grieving dad recalls a phone call he had with his oldest son, Bradley Zimmerman, on July 30, 2022.

He said he was out of town and his son Bradley was at home in Carrboro. Zimmerman said he had no idea that phone call would be their last.

"I texted him first thing in the morning, Scott said, "No response, which is not unusual." But by two o'clock that afternoon and still no response from Bradley, Scott was worried and called Bradley's mother and asked her to check on their son.

"Unfortunately I wish I hadn't made that call", Scott said quietly, "cause she found him."

Bradley Zimmerman was found dead in his Carrboro home by his mother on July 31st, 2022. Bradley was just 29 years old.

Adding to the family's shock and grief, was the waiting for a cause of death.

### *"Incredibly tragic for the families."*

It took the state lab almost six months to rule Bradley's death as a fentanyl overdose. Without an autopsy or toxicology report, Carrboro's Police Chief, says his officers had to wait all those months to make an arrest.

Doing his own digging, Scott was shocked to find out the reason it took so long to get the cause of death. There is only one toxicologist at North Carolina's state morgue.

And that is just the tip of the iceberg. North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services Secretary confirms the problem.

"When you have a 30% increase in workload and a 26% vacancy rate, from start to finish some of our turnaround times can be upwards of 9 months," Secretary, Kody Kinsley laments, "I know that's incredibly tragic for the families and the criminal justice system."

According to the North Carolina Medical Examiner, sudden, unexpected suspicious and violent deaths increased in North Carolina more than 30% over the last three years.

## ***"Something's gotta be done."***

According to their data, suspected drug overdoses are up 58% from 2019 to 2022. The backlog of cases at the state lab is so overwhelming bodies are being stored in two refrigerated semi trucks behind the state lab building because the morgue is full.

"We are not resourced to manage the problem today" Kinsley explains, "and if resourced more we could be doing more to identify these folks distributing these drugs"

Kinsley urges state lawmakers to raise salaries to increase the number of pathologists.

"Many of our staff have been offered jobs in other states," Kinsley says, "making two or three times what they've been offered here."

Kinsley says the state should also increase fees to regional autopsy centers that help with the state's caseload. Kinsley says the state pays regional autopsy centers \$2,600 per autopsy which he says is less than half the national average.

"Something's gotta be done," Scott says about the fentanyl crisis, "I mean if you just look at the stats, it's unbelievable. Like nothing we've seen before."

Nine months after Bradley Zimmerman's death, Police charged 31-year-old John Robert Small of Carrboro with three felonies, including death by distribution.

Bradley's family is now vowing to help in the fentanyl fight, including raising funds to provide free Narcan vending machines in Carrboro and Chapel Hill in Bradley's memory.

Asked how he wanted Bradley remembered, Scott paused, "The way people remember him. They know how to remember him. Bradley was a sweet boy."

ABC11 Eyewitness News reached out to John Robert Small's attorney and we are waiting for a response.

The next scheduled court date for Small's case is in December in Orange County Superior Court.

*"The dead cannot cry out for justice. It is a duty of the living to do so for them." --Lois McMaster Bujold*