

NYPD gets biggest share of new city funding to fight overdose deaths

Will stepping up drug-dealer arrests help alleviate the opioid crisis? BY CAROLINE LEWIS

When the de Blasio administration announced its HealingNYC initiative in March to lower the death toll from opioid overdoses, Police Commissioner James O'Neill lauded the initiative, saying "We can't arrest our way out of this problem."

But the police department will be getting millions of dollars a year to do just that, according to a city budget document.

Nearly half of the \$143.7 million budgeted for HealingNYC through fiscal year 2021 will go to the NYPD, mostly to step up arrests of drug dealers.

The rest of the funds will be spread among multiple agencies and spent on public health approaches such as expanding access to naloxone, the drug that reverses opioid overdoses, and addiction treatment.

Some \$13.6 million of the \$16 million to \$18 million allotted to the NYPD annually through the program will go to the department's Overdose Response Initiative, which investigates overdoses to trace drugs back to dealers. Precincts across the city have started investigating overdoses during the past year, the police department said. The new funds will allow the NYPD to dedicate 84 detectives and 50 additional laboratory staffers to the effort.

The NYPD is transferring detectives to the Overdose Response Initiative from within the force and will use HealingNYC funds to fill those vacated positions, according to the department.

"New York City is facing an opioid drug crisis driven by a toxic mixture of cheap heroin and fentanyl, which is why we launched HealingNYC—a comprehensive initiative that combines proven public health and safety efforts to reduce overdose deaths," a city spokeswoman said in a statement.

Disrupting the supply chain

Since January the Police Department has opened more than 550 investigations into overdoses, a spokeswoman said. On Staten Island the Overdose Response Initiative has been in place since February 2016 and has resulted in the takedown of three drug rings and the arrests of nearly 75 dealers, according to the Richmond County District Attorney's Office.

"This is vital to our success in both stemming the flow of opioids into our communities and reducing the number of overdose deaths," said Richmond County District Attorney Michael McMahon. "It cannot be stated enough just how important the Overdose Response Initiative has been in our fight to put dealers behind bars and save lives."

But Leo Beletsky, associate professor of law and health sciences at Northeastern University School of Law, said little evidence exists to support the idea that arresting drug dealers will lead to fewer overdoses.

"Taking someone out of the drug supply chain has not been shown to affect the drug supply," said Beletsky, who has consulted for the city and is famil-



iar with its opioid initiatives. "It disrupts the supply chain for a few days, if that."

He also said sending police to investigate overdoses "runs at complete cross-purposes to New York's Good Samaritan Law." The measure is supposed to protect people who call 911 to report an overdose from getting arrested.

Gathering information about where overdoses are taking place and the contents of the drugs involved helps inform the city's response and educate people about the risks of drug use, but this work can be done by the Health Department, said Beletsky.

The NYPD will also receive about \$2 million every other year to equip officers with naloxone kits, and roughly the same amount annually to expand local involvement in federal efforts to block drugs from entering the city, a city spokeswoman said. ■

Rosa Goldensohn contributed to this story.

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Northwell leads \$8 million funding round for Conversa

Conversa, a San Francisco startup whose platform helps health care providers communicate with patients, raised \$8 million in a Series A funding round led by Northwell Ventures, the company said.

"When we're out in the marketplace, we're evaluating all these competing technologies," said Eric Feinstein, venture capital manager at Northwell Health. "What struck me the first time I saw Conversa is the simplicity of the platform from a user-experience standpoint." Northwell Health is now working to put Conversa to use.

The platform aims to engage patients who have been discharged following surgery or who are managing chronic diseases such as diabetes in order to collect information on their progress.

Once the platform

is available, patients receive a link to the Conversa chat platform via text or email, depending on their preference, and then are prompted to answer questions about their health. —C.L.

Manhattan health care marketer buys a rival

Mesmerize Marketing, which places ads inside doctors' offices and pharmacies, has acquired a rival, Bethel, Conn.-based Elite Sampling & Media Group.

Founded in 2006, Mesmerize displays so-called static advertising—such as wallboards, brochures and posters—in waiting and exam rooms for clients including Gilead Sciences and Merck.

The deal will expand the company's network to include 50,000 physicians. "This gives us critical mass to be the largest static media company at the point of care," Mesmerize CEO Gregory Leibert said. —J.L.