

# SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

*A Joint Press Release From The Offices Of*



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## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

DECEMBER 10, 2015

### **Special Panel Discusses Impact of the Opioid Epidemic on Suffolk's Newborns at Health Committee**

*Legislator William R. Spencer, M.D., assembles panel to discuss the increase of infants born addicted to opioids*

**Hauppauge, NY** - With recent reports indicating an alarming increase in the number of infants born addicted to opioids, Legislator William R. Spencer, M.D. brought together a panel to discuss the issue at Thursday's Health Committee.

The panel, comprised of professionals in the field from a range of backgrounds, discussed the effects of neonatal abstinence syndrome, how it relates to the drug epidemic, and what we can do to move forward. Panelists included: Dr. Jeffrey Reynolds, Chief Executive Officer of Family and Children's Association; Steve Chassman of LICADD; Dr. Carolyn Milana from Stony Brook Hospital Nursery; Lisa Clark, Nurse Practitioner at Stony Brook Children's Hospital; Judy Richter a licensed master social worker from Huntington Hospital; Dennis Nowak from Suffolk County Child Protective Services; and Tom Schmidt, a Suffolk County Methadone Maintenance Treatment Administrator.

"The opiate epidemic in Suffolk and across our nation continues to grow and it is taking a toll on all of our communities, emotionally, physically, financially and spiritually. It's a multi-generational issue, ravaging the lives of those young and old, and now we are seeing the impacts on the most innocent members of our society, newborn babies who are coming into this world exposed to opioids." said Legislator William R. Spencer, M.D.

Neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) has become more and more prevalent in newborns as the increase in heroin and prescription drug abuse among adults worsens. Nationally, numbers show a fivefold increase in the number of babies born with NAS from 2000 to 2012, and it is estimated that every 25 minutes, a baby is born suffering from opioid withdrawal.

"Of all the counties in New York, Suffolk has the second highest number of infants born with drugs in their systems," said Suffolk County Legislature Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory. "This alarming data demands our immediate attention. Heroin is simply too accessible, and we must devote more resources to stopping the flow of drugs into our county. In addition to enforcement, both education and treatment must be incorporated into a multi-prong plan to fight this rising tide of drug addiction. I commend Legislator Spencer for assembling this panel today, and I look forward to working in partnership with health care professionals, community groups, and other government officials as we strive to end this epidemic."

NAS presents as a group of problems and symptoms that occur when a baby is exposed to addictive opiates such as heroin, methadone, or oxycodone in utero. Once born, the infant begins to experience withdrawal symptoms which include: diarrhea, inconsolable crying or high-pitched crying, excessive sucking, fever, hyperactive reflexes, irritability, poor feeding, rapid breathing, seizures, sleep disturbance, slow weight gain, sweating, trembling (tremors), and vomiting. Various factors such as type of drug used, the length and amount

of use, whether the child was born full-term or premature, and the infant's general state of health, contribute to the severity of the symptoms and the course of treatment recommended by professionals. The general goal remains the same, to ween the infant off the drugs safely, and without permanent damage. Treatment is modified on a case-by-case basis.

"Mothers who are not yet in recovery programs lose their babies and need options that will allow them to be successful in recovery. My experience with these women is that despite their addiction, they love their children. They are motivated to quit and need to keep the hope that they will regain custody of their children." said Dr. Carolyn Milana, of Stony Brook Children's Hospital. "My hope is that working with legislators, the medical community, rehab and counseling centers we can increase the services we provide to these families."

"The pregnant, addicted woman is living in the shadows. There's a lot of shame and guilt surrounding this issue, which prevents addicted women from getting proper prenatal care." said Judy Richter, LMSW. "We need to expand education about what services are out there, and emphasize that they won't be stigmatized for seeking help."

Dr. Tomarken, the Commissioner of the Suffolk County Department of Health Services provided insight into what the County is working on. "Our focus is to integrate the needs and services of addicted mothers into mainstream health care; primary and behavioral care should not be separate. We hope to create a central referral source with a variety of services all in one common place. The department is embracing it, and we will be moving forward with that at the beginning of the year."

Presiding Officer Gregory last week called for the formation of a joint effort between Nassau and Suffolk County lawmakers to fight this rising epidemic.

"There is no single fail safe solution to this problem, but approaching it from all angles and perspectives, and coming together as a community to offer education on prevention, treatment and recovery is how we can begin to move forward," concluded Legislator William R. Spencer, M.D.

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