

DATE:

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

Fentanyl, a Public Health Crisis

COUNTY OF IMPERIAL

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

940 W. Main St. Suite 201

El Centro, CA 92241

Dear Chairman Kelley,

Accidental overdose deaths caused by fentanyl have reached historic levels across the nation. [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) estimate that over 80,000 overdose deaths caused by fentanyl occurred in 2021 alone](#). Data from the CDC shows that accidental deaths caused by fentanyl is the number one killer of people between the ages of 18 and 45, far exceeding the number of deaths caused by car accidents, COVID, heart disease, and gun violence within this age group.

According to the [Southern District of California, San Diego and Imperial Counties are at the epicenter for the trafficking of synthetic fentanyl](#), a drug that is 30 to 50 times more powerful than heroin, rendering even a tiny amount potentially deadly. Recently released statistics reflect that [more than 60% of the nation's fentanyl border seizures](#) by U.S. Customs and Border Protection occur in San Diego and Imperial Counties, more than at any of the nation's 300-plus ports of entries. Over the past three years within the El Centro sector, border officials have seized [thousands of pounds of fentanyl and other illegal narcotics](#).

Despite the thousands of pounds of fentanyl and other drugs seized along our border, deadly narcotics continue to pour through and poison our cities and streets, leaving our local law enforcement officers (LEOs) to address the criminal aspect of this crisis. Although it is vital to incorporate a holistic approach surrounding the use fentanyl with an emphasis on the importance of treatment, recovery, and demand reduction; law enforcement must be considered and prioritized in regards to the sale of fentanyl in order to protect the public through just, reasonable, and consequential means. This means continued correspondence with state and federal officials reiterating the need for additional funding as [rural law enforcement agencies, like those in Imperial County, have historically had difficulties with recruitment and retention](#) as many LEOs leave for better pay and opportunities after local investments are made into their training and preparation. In addition, this also means that crimes pertaining to the sale of illicit fentanyl should be prosecuted to the fullest extent possible.

Although Imperial County has not yet experienced the high number of fentanyl overdose deaths seen in other regions, the numbers are on the rise, and the County continues to have one of the [highest rate of opioid emergency department visits in the state](#). These factors show that fentanyl and opioids are harming our community at large and straining our already impacted healthcare system. With substance abuse and addiction on the rise, these issues will only exacerbate in the coming years as unemployment and lack of treatment services continue to be matters of concern within the County. Furthermore, the number of emergency department visits speaks to the issues our County faces regarding lack of physicians, treatment, and services as locals are faced with the reality of living in a rural, socially isolated, and economically marginalized environment with [less access to personalized healthcare, drug treatment, and harm reduction services](#).

This drug crisis has touched all parts of the Imperial County with the most impacted zip codes located in the north end region. According to the [California Overdose Surveillance Dashboard](#), the communities of Westmorland, Niland, and Brawley make up three of the top four zip codes in Imperial County with the highest age-related overdose death rates in the county.

While fentanyl is the number one killer of people between the ages of 18 and 45, it is worth noting the increasing threat the drug poses to the youth in our communities. An example being [the tragic story](#) of a local 15-year-old high school student losing their life in 2021 due to fentanyl. This danger extends beyond those even willingly using illicit substances as many more children across our state, some as young as [ten months of age](#), have ingested fentanyl carelessly left within reach by others. While most children that have overdosed ended up surviving due to the quick and informed action of first responders, there are other [heartbreaking examples](#) where some have not.

The threat to our youth from fentanyl is heightened in this age of social media. Drug dealers have taken to apps like SnapChat, Instagram, and Facebook, marketing what they claim to be legitimate medications such as OxyContin, Percocet, Adderall, and Xanax. These pills are almost always counterfeit, containing none of the actual medication, but possessing often fatal doses of fentanyl, methamphetamine, or other harmful drugs.

This also extends beyond our youth, and crosses our shared border region, specifically for all those that purchase medication in our neighboring southern sister cities of Mexico. Those that purchase medication across our border put themselves at risk of obtaining tainted pharmaceuticals. A [recent report by the LA Times](#) found that pills sold as painkillers in Mexico oftentimes contained fentanyl and/or methamphetamine. In total, their independent investigation found that 71% of pills they tested came up positive for more powerful drugs. Even more alarming, a [UCLA-led study](#) provided the first scientific evidence that a majority of brick and mortar pharmacies in Northern Mexican tourist towns sold high-powered prescription drugs over the counter without a prescription.

Due to the current and expanding threat that fentanyl and other illicit drugs pose to our community at large and in order to further elevate awareness among Imperial County residents, the County of Imperial should take swift action to support the declaration of illicit fentanyl as a Public Health Crisis. In addition to this declaration of a Public Health Crisis, we ask of the Imperial County Board of Supervisors and relevant departments to consider any the following recommendations:

- Collect and compile data on opioid and fentanyl-related arrests, seizures, overdoses, and fatalities in Imperial County, and prepare a report on current impacts to community services.
- Through the Imperial County Public Health Department, Behavioral Health Services, Imperial County Sheriff's Office, and District Attorney, a countywide information and marketing/communication campaign relating to opioid overdose prevention and the dangers of fentanyl. To include the incorporation of existing campaigns being conducted by individual county/city departments, boards, committees, and/or task forces.
- Coordinate and host, this calendar year, a panel/discussion on the fentanyl crisis, similar to the Colorado River Summit and Future of Healthcare in Imperial County Roundtable.
- Conduct an overview of current and potential sources of state and federal grant funding for fentanyl awareness and education.
- Targeted analysis of harm reduction efforts and assessment of naloxone training successes. Including any potential outreach to parent or family groups to make them aware of the signs of

opioid abuse or addiction, the lethality of fentanyl, and the efficacy of naloxone in instances of related overdose.

- Expansion of training for Law Enforcement/Fire Department/EMS personnel on the risks of exposure to fentanyl through routine law-enforcement, emergency, or life-saving activities.
- Work with the Imperial County Sheriff's and District Attorney's Offices to prioritize continuing to enforce fentanyl sales related crimes to the fullest extent permissible and booking into jail those arrested for fentanyl sales crimes, as permitted by law and applicable regulations.
- Work with Imperial County District Attorney and regional partners to track cases, prosecuted, and convictions won on fentanyl sales crimes.
- Work with the Imperial County District Attorney to request the court to order geographic probation and stayaway orders for offenders with multiple drug sales convictions and seeking homicide or manslaughter charges when sales result in an overdose death.

Through these actions, we believe this may be as proactive approach as we can take at this time. We appreciate all current efforts planned and administered, and we offer this letter as a sign of goodwill and assistance to address an issue affecting the quality of life for all those that live, work, and travel within the city of Brawley and County of Imperial.