



**New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing: Mental Hygiene Committee
February 14, 2022
Testimony from Via Transportation**

New York State has the opportunity to lead the nation in combating the opioid crisis by piloting technology-enabled transportation to increase access to treatment and recovery services statewide by:

- Investing \$2mm per year over two years to pilot two transportation demonstration programs in an urban and a rural/suburban setting, after which an RFP process is launched to scale the program statewide;
- Providing those with opioid use disorder accessible, reliable, and technology-enabled transportation (including digital booking tools, on-demand ride-hailing, and caregiver management portals) to and from places of treatment and recovery.

Need

The opioid crisis in New York is pervasive and growing. In 2019, over 3,500 New Yorkers died from opioid overdose. The crisis has only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, with overdose deaths increasing 30% statewide from February 2020 to February 2021.

Ensuring access to treatment is a core component of remediating the opioid crisis, particularly in New York. While effective care for opioid use disorder exists today, the majority of people with an addiction are not receiving it. Despite having the *largest* number of Opioid Treatment Programs in the country, New York still maintains a relatively high opioid overdose death rate, the 26th highest in the US. Treatment can only be effective if people in need of services can get to it; and, access to treatment should not be predicated on personal car ownership or where an individual lives.

To close this treatment gap, it is imperative to remove barriers to care -- and *one of the most significant barriers is transportation*. Many opioid use disorder treatment regimens require daily or weekly in-person clinic visits over months or years, and individuals seeking these services often lack safe and affordable transportation options. These transportation barriers are particularly acute in rural areas, where travel distances tend to be long; public transit is sparse or nonexistent; and individuals with opioid use disorder lack private vehicles or driver's licenses. Vulnerable populations are disproportionately burdened by the opioid crisis, yet face the largest barriers to treatment. In 2019, Latinx New Yorkers had the highest drug overdose death rate for the second consecutive year, yet were *least* likely to own a private vehicle, despite having longer commute times, as measured by travel time to work.



While Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) may be available to individuals covered by Medicaid, these services are difficult to access and are narrowly scoped to medical services; they do not, for instance, support transportation to employment, social services, outpatient therapy, grocery stores, or other holistic social determinants of health (SDOH) required for individuals to effectively recover. Our New York advocacy partners, Friends of Recovery, find that transportation is consistently reported as one of top needs of the New York recovery community, particularly for non-NEMT covered use cases.

Opioid Treatment and Recovery Transportation Service

Between the opioid settlement funds awarded to New York State totaling over a billion dollars to date, and increased federal support for opioid recovery, we urge New York State to increase funding for technology-enabled transportation services to ensure those who need treatment can access it. Governor Hochul has the opportunity to launch a comprehensive solution to New York's opioid crisis by piloting technology-enabled transportation to increase access to treatment and recovery services statewide.

The 2021-2022 New York State Budget allocated funding of \$450,000 to an addiction recovery transportation demonstration program. This demonstration program provides those with substance use disorder access to care not typically covered by the Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) Medicaid benefit, such as transportation to employment, education, support group, and legal appointments.

This investment in increasing access to opioid use disorder care is an important start, but we believe that much more can be done. We encourage Governor Hochul and New York State to continue to lead the nation in combating the opioid crisis by enabling all communities to access the entire continuum of recovery care, prioritizing solutions that optimize for dignity, ease, and positive health outcomes for all New Yorkers. Specifically:

- Invest \$2mm per year over two years to pilot two transportation demonstration programs in an urban and a rural/suburban setting, after which an RFP process is launched to scale the program statewide;
- Provide those with opioid use disorder accessible, reliable, and technology-enabled transportation (including digital booking tools, on-demand ride-hailing, and caregiver management portals) to and from places of treatment and recovery;
- Derive evidence-based insights on the effects of transportation on addressing the opioid crisis in New York and across urban and suburban/rural settings.