

Social Movement Fields, Party Politics, and Approaches to the Opioid Epidemic in Central New York

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On December 27, 2017, the Broome County legislature in upstate New York approved a measure that brought New York State "pass-through" funding to open a detox center, available to those suffering from withdrawal from alcohol, opioids, and other drugs. The vote of the Republican-dominated legislature -- eleven in favor and four opposed -- belied what had been a sustained and heated battle to get the legislature to allow Syracuse Behavioral Health (SBH), a provider with a sterling reputation, to open the center.² Despite the promise of almost three million dollars of funding, the new jobs that would come with the center, the prospect of filling a public health need-- all in a county with one of the state's highest rate of drug overdoses-- legislators alternately tried to shut down debate and downplay the issue.³ A coalition of activists who had been advocating on behalf of users, some with positions in already existing organizations, some new to the fight, showed up to county hearings to testify as to the needs of their loved ones, their clients, and themselves as users in recovery; key among these groups was a grassroots anti-opioid organization called Truth Pharm.⁴ The general consul for the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS), along with the director

¹ Authors are listed in alphabetical order. Per 2021 instructions for ASA's virtual meeting, Roth is the author of record in the program.

² <https://www.pressconnects.com/story/news/local/2017/12/27/legislature-approves-state-funding-opioid-treatment-center-11-4-vote/985261001/>

³ https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/opioid/data/pdf/nys_opioid_annual_report_2017.pdf

⁴ See www.truthpharm.org .

of SBH came to Broome a number of times, including on the day of the scheduled vote, to meet with legislators. Notwithstanding all these efforts at education, the legislators' debate to a packed chamber of citizens and local politicians was full of misconceptions about the impact of the epidemic, and full of class and racially charged objections to who would be treated at the center. But community and professional concerns prevailed, and the center, which opened in April of 2018, has been at capacity ever since, with SBH planning to open an in-person treatment facility within the coming year.

In 2016, the City of Ithaca, the county seat New York's Tompkins County, put forward a comprehensive and much cited plan to battle the opioid epidemic.⁵ "The Ithaca Plan," as it became known, called for, among other things, exploring the possibilities of putting in place a supervised injection site for intravenous drug users. That policy proposal received an outsized amount of attention, but the plan called for many other policy adjustments on the part of the city of Ithaca and Tompkins County.⁶ The Ithaca Plan called for cooperation between the city and the county on five coordinated fronts: "governance and leadership;" "education;" "recovery-oriented treatment, harm reduction, and ancillary services;" "community and economic development;" and "public safety." The Ithaca Plan presented a road map that seems to have been instrumental in leading Tompkins County's Department of Health to make information on the opioid crisis easy to get; the department's website has easily accessible information highlighted on their webpage, including research reports and information on the

⁵http://www.cityofithaca.org/DocumentCenter/View/4224/The_Ithaca_Drug_Plan_19Feb2016
RREFERENCE?bidId=

⁶ Ithaca Mayor Svante Myrick stated that he was unprepared for the onslaught of media attention that the Ithaca Plan generated, much of it at the national level (Roth's field notes, October 28 2016).

state of the epidemic statewide. Improvements in services in Tompkins County have been made, with a methadone clinic and a detox program open as of 2019.⁷

Rural Tioga County, with a population of just 50,000, has no hospital within county lines, let alone a detox center or methadone clinic. It did, however, have a problem with opioid use and overdoses. In 2017, a few members of the service organization Casa Trinity, who had opened a small office in the village of Owego, the county seat, worked with Truth Pharm to develop a "community response action plan" as a model for determining what services were available to the community, and what services were lacking. The Action Plan that resulted listed services for mental health and stress, doctors who would prescribe drugs to medically assist in recovery, needle exchange and sharps disposal sites, where to get naloxone, how to call emergency medical services, where to find prescription drop off sites, support groups, and even housing resources.⁸ Also in 2017, the county was awarded state funding as part of the New York State's "Center of Treatment Innovation (COTI)" plan, which funded a new entity called the Tioga County Alcohol and Substance Abuse Coalition, or TC-ASAP.⁹ The coalition has brought a large group of chiefly institutional actors in governmental and non-governmental

⁷ <https://ithacavoices.com/2019/10/cars-to-offer-methadone-and-expand-opioid-treatment-options-in-ithaca/> ; <https://tompkinscountyny.gov/news/alcohol-drug-council-tompkins-county>

⁸ <https://www.tiogacountyny.com/media/3852/owego-resources-and-needs-assessment.pdf>. Naloxone (brand name Narcan) is an overdose reversal drug. Casa Trinity's website is <https://www.casa-trinity.org/>. Roth participated in creating the Tioga Action Plan as did Truth Pharm's executive director. The Action Plan requires the formation of a "Community Action Committee," whose members are present throughout the process, and who help "to identify stakeholders and partners in their community as well as helping them form a lasting community action group." Committee members planned a series of events for the community including an "initial community awareness event;" a naloxone training; follow-up forums; and a high school assembly event.

⁹ <https://tiogaasap.org/>

services, law enforcement and some concerned citizens together in monthly meetings aimed at sharing information and coordinating the prevention of tobacco, alcohol and drug use.

The briefly limned sketches above point to the purposes we have in this paper. We argue that local and state politics matter greatly in accounting for different approaches to the opioid epidemic in Central New York, and that activists and institutional actors find themselves in very different social movement “fields” (Ray 1999). Despite their proximity and similar demographics, each county developed different responses to fighting the opioid epidemic. In Broome, activists (often) confronted recalcitrant institutional actors and forced them to act in response to public claims, showing a classic social movement outsider/institutional insider dynamic, and resulting in incremental changes in the approach to the opioid epidemic. In Tompkins, a coalition of outsiders and insiders were brought under the institutional umbrella of a task force, resulting in more harm reduction-oriented approaches to the epidemic. And in Tioga, the absence of outsider activists and the provision of state monies resulted in a coalition of institutional actors with fairly standard prevention goals. The three of us – a professor (Roth) and two graduate students in sociology (Akalin and Friday) have been working to gather data about these three in ongoing research that has received both internal and external funding.¹⁰ In this paper, we explore our findings to date, using the theoretical lenses of social movement fields and social stigma (Goffman 1963, and we consider local political responses to harm

¹⁰ Roth received a Social Science Research Council Award in 2019 for participating in the SSRC’s “Anxieties of Democracy/ Identity, Community, and Participation” program;” Roth also received one of 2019’s Harpur Faculty Research Grant (Harpur is the liberal arts college of Binghamton University).

reduction approaches to dealing with the epidemic (Lenton and Single 1998). We then consider what overall demographics of race/ethnicity and class can (or cannot) tell us about the local politics of the epidemic, and we consider the media environment in Broome, Tioga and Tompkins counties. We then look at the markers of stark political differences from county to county to argue that the local politics of each needs to be part of our understanding of responses to the opioid epidemic, and we conclude by stating where our research will go next.

References

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