

# Drug strategy agency mixing health, safety proposed in NYC

April 16 2015, by Jennifer Peltz

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A new drug policy agency would focus as much on health as on policing under a proposal a lawmaker plans to formally introduce Thursday to shift how the nation's biggest city approaches illegal drug use.

The drug strategy office would advise city leaders on lowering drug-related deaths and disease along with crime. It also would coordinate answers to a problem that sometimes seems to pit one set of government objectives against another, supporters say.

Advocates say it would be one of few local agencies of its kind nationwide, and New York's size would make it a showcase for less punitive, more public-health-minded drug policies.

"It's about getting people treatment and also ensuring that we have high standards for public safety," said Councilman Corey Johnson, who heads the health committee that likely would give the proposal a first-round consideration.

Mayor Bill de Blasio's office had no immediate comment.

The drug strategy agency would analyze current policies and programs, recommend improvements and review proposals. An advisory council would include police, health officials, social services providers and former drug users.

New York City has special drug courts, a taskforce looking at how the

criminal justice system addresses addiction, a special narcotics prosecutor, a roster of substance abuse services and a mayor who decided last fall to start ticketing, instead of arresting, thousands of people carrying small amounts of marijuana.

But the drug strategy office could help work through complexities like the interplay between government-approved needle-exchange programs and a state law against carrying syringes, said Matt Curtis, the policy director of advocacy group Vocal NY.

The misdemeanor law exempts people allowed to get needles. But such permission can be hard to show immediately, since exchange program enrollment cards are anonymized to protect privacy, said Terrell Jones, who works with an exchange program. He said some people shy away from it for fear of arrest.

"They don't feel protected" despite the exemption meant to protect them, he said.

The proposed [drug policy](#) office would echo strategies used in some European and Canadian cities. The U.S. has a National Office of Drug Control Policy and some [drug](#) strategy agencies in such places as Denver and the state of Idaho.

"To have the largest city in the country consider legislation that would create an office to do that" could create a model for others, said Gabriel Sayegh, the Drug Policy Alliance's director for New York state.

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