

Fentanyl victims' families applaud Texas governor's efforts, but many want a broader approach

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As the fentanyl crisis gripped Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott ramped up border security, signed laws toughening criminal penalties for drug dealers and tied the problem to President Joe Biden's immigration policies.

In his third term as governor, Abbott has been as aggressive as any politician in responding to calls to do something to stop people from dying from the [illicit drug](#).

"Texas is on the front lines of dealing with the fentanyl crisis caused by Biden's open border policies," Abbott said in August during a speech in Dallas.

"Just Texas law enforcement alone has seized more than enough fentanyl to kill every man, woman and child in the entire United States of America," he said. "The number of Americans who would have lost their lives, if it were not for what Texas is doing, is completely incalculable."

Abbott's effort to fight fentanyl has centered around his marquee initiative, Operation Lone Star, a nearly \$10 billion effort to secure the border. In that August speech, Abbott said that Biden should send him an oversized "thank you" card for his efforts. Since March 2021 Texas has spent over \$4.5 billion on Operation Lone Star, and \$5 billion more was allocated this year.

But according to U.S. border authorities, about 90% of illicit fentanyl is seized at official crossings, and the drugs are rarely carried by migrants or asylum-seekers sneaking into the U.S.

In 2021, U.S. citizens made up 86.3% of convicted fentanyl traffickers, or 10 times greater than the number of illegal immigrants convicted of the same offense, according to the Cato Institute, citing U.S. Sentencing Commission data. In 2018, U.S. citizens comprised 80% of convicted fentanyl traffickers, according to the commission.

The Texas Department of Public Safety, however, says state law enforcement has seized 426 million lethal doses of fentanyl in areas not actively patrolled by the [federal government](#).

The disparate views of the fentanyl crisis reflect the complex political tug of war between Abbott and federal officials over immigration and [border security](#) policy.

Abbott has used the fentanyl fight as a weapon against Biden and others in the long-running political battle over immigration. Border security has always been a rallying point for Republicans across the country, and Abbott's feud with Biden has made him a national figure.

"It's become politicized and caught up in the issue with the border security, and I just don't really think that the two things are all that related," said Katharine Harris, a drug policy fellow at Rice University. "The drugs are coming in because we have a demand for drugs here. And focusing on the border isn't doing anything to address the problem of drug demand in the U.S."

Jim Henson, director of the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin, shares Harris' perspective: "When you start putting fentanyl in strong frames like criminal justice and border security, the

public health elements of it almost inevitably recede to some degree."

While the growing community of victims' families applauds some of Abbott's work, many say the state's approach should be broader. To the law-and-order policies that resonate with the Republican political base, they want the governor and lawmakers to add more resources for treatment, prevention and awareness.

They urge elected leaders to get their facts straight, tell the complete story and listen to the families of fentanyl victims, instead of using them as props.

"We are not political pawns," said Stefanie Turner, founder of Texas Against Fentanyl, a group that raises awareness of the perils of taking the synthetic opioid.

Fentanyl seizures, tougher penalties

The Texas Department of Public Safety says it has seized just over 1,880 pounds of fentanyl across the state as part of Operation Lone Star, which launched in March 2021. About 2 milligrams of fentanyl is considered lethal by the DEA, so the DPS calculates it has seized over 426 million lethal doses.

By comparison, nationwide, the DEA says it seized the equivalent of over 387.9 million lethal doses of fentanyl in 2022, and over 204 million lethal doses so far this year.

The number of fentanyl doses seized by Texas authorities promotes the assertion that the federal government's border security measures are lacking, particularly in the areas where migrants, smugglers and traffickers illegally cross the border.

"President Joe Biden's reckless open border policies have allowed historic levels of fentanyl to flood across our border, creating the single-deadliest drug threat Texas and our nation have ever seen as the No. 1 killer of Americans ages 18-45," said Andrew Mahaleris, a spokesman for Abbott.

He noted Abbott signed laws "to prosecute fentanyl deaths as murder and provide more life-saving Narcan to Texas colleges and universities. ... Gov. Abbott will continue working with the Legislature to secure the border and protect Texans from the scourge of fentanyl."

Abbott's approach has been effective, said Williamson County Sheriff Mike Gleason, a Republican. "We need to close our border to these folks and figure out ways to combat that down there," he said, adding he also supports awareness and treatment components.

This year, the Legislature passed laws to toughen penalties for fentanyl-related crimes, including the possibility of fentanyl dealers being charged with murder. Much of what the Legislature approved targeted school students.

Fentanyl is often pressed into fake pills resembling Percocet, OxyContin or Xanax, or mixed with other illicit drugs in illegal, unsophisticated operations. Law enforcement says buyers are often unaware.

Abbott signed a law that, effective this month, requires schools to provide research-based instruction on fentanyl abuse prevention to students in grades 6-12.

The governor also signed a law that allows the Texas Health and Human Services Commission to partner with colleges and universities to provide on their campuses Narcan, a brand of naloxone, the drug that reverses [opioid overdoses](#). Another law designates October Fentanyl Poisoning

Awareness Month.

Harris likes [new legislation](#) that requires more mapping of fentanyl cases.

"There have been some efforts to improve mapping data collection of overdoses," Harris said. "That's another current weakness that we have. We don't track overdose deaths."

Concerns about 'one pill kills'

Abbott describes fentanyl deaths as poisonings. In the process, he has cast the victim who is unaware they are consuming the substance as the symbol of the fentanyl fight.

Abbott has promoted the state's "one pill kills" campaign to spread awareness about the dangers of fentanyl. The campaign, which Abbott announced in 2022, is in coordination with the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. In April, Abbott unveiled a \$10 million awareness initiative as part of the campaign. Federal grant money would help pay for public service announcements via TV and radio stations and online publications.

The HHSC is allocating \$5 million in 2023 to the "one pill kills" campaign and another \$5 million next year, according to commission spokeswoman Jennifer Ruffcorn.

Turner, the founder of Texas Against Fentanyl, lost her son, Tucker Roe, two years ago to fentanyl. The 19-year-old died after taking a fentanyl-laced pill he thought was Xanax to help him sleep. In June, she sat next to Abbott as he signed a law bearing her son's name that mandates fentanyl awareness courses in schools.

"The people in my community who understand what's happening are very disappointed that the governor's office is focusing on the 'one pill kills' campaign," Turner said.

"It is sending a message that fentanyl is only in pills, and we know that that is not true," she said. "It's not giving the correct representation of the problem, and it's concerning that they are spending time and money to push something that isn't a complete truth."

She's also worried about the state's speed in responding to the crisis, contending some money allocated for awareness campaigns is being unused. And she says the state needs to do a better job of mapping fentanyl cases in order to learn from the data. Mapping would allow officials to spot trends in fentanyl deaths and better respond, she said.

"We have new people who are added to our community every single day," Turner said of fentanyl deaths.

Harris, the drug policy expert, said she gives Abbott and the Legislature a grade of C-minus for the 2023 session.

"The state didn't put any general revenue towards increasing access for drug treatment," she said. "The governor's 'one pill kills' campaign is funded with federal money and opioid abatement dollars, so the state hasn't committed any of its own general revenue to addressing this problem."

Abbott and his team insist they had a strong year combating the problem, while conceding it's a long-term fight.

"It was a giant leap forward, but this is a continual focus, and it is not going away because we passed eight laws," said Dave Carney, the governor's chief political strategist. "This is going to take a massive

amount of education and a massive amount of cooperation between law enforcement and parents."

State Rep. Craig Goldman, R-Fort Worth, who carried a bill to toughen fentanyl crimes, said the goal of the Legislature was to "limit the amount of distribution of fentanyl in our state."

"Hopefully we will be able to curtail fentanyl," he said. "If we need to come back and do more in two years, we will."

Political lessons from the past

Abbott's approach has been largely about law and order, which plays to his conservative Republican base.

"It's a strange reprise of the 'war on drugs' approach that seemed to have been de-legitimated for a while, but it's found a new life in this kind of discourse," said Henson, the University of Texas political scientist.

Harris said there are lessons to be learned from the approach lawmakers and politicians took in the 1980s and 1990s, when the response to crack cocaine led to the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act and a dramatic increase in mass incarcerations.

In the age of fentanyl, she said, you have to distinguish between the person selling and taking a drug like Adderall versus someone peddling heroin. Fentanyl can be present in both.

Turner, the anti-fentanyl activist, agrees with Abbott's border policies and wants to hold criminals accountable. But she adds that not every criminal case is the same.

"Oftentimes, they're in the depths of drug addiction themselves," she

said. "Is it correct to put a teenager who was struggling with [substance use disorder](#) in prison for the rest of his life? I don't know."

On Aug. 31, members of a group called Vocal-TX protested at the governor's mansion by placing fake gravestones with epitaphs listing Abbott's "failures to confront the overdose crisis." The protest coincided with International Overdose Awareness Day and was on the eve of the new law bringing harsher penalties for drug deals that lead to fentanyl deaths.

"The governor's actions around the overdose crisis have been an abject failure, and no matter how much money he throws at things like Operation Lone Star or police, we know that those are failing strategies to address overdose deaths," said Paulette Soltani, co-state director of Vocal Texas. "This new attempt to charge people with drug-induced homicide is just going to fail again."

Carney, Abbott's political strategist, said tougher laws against drug dealing are necessary.

"The federal crime bill did a lot to lower street crime and other issues with crack cocaine," he said. "You can't be sympathetic to the drug dealer if you're going to try to dry up fentanyl at a Friday night pool party."

Carney added that being tough on crime shouldn't be the only approach, but said finishing the mission takes everyone involved. "That can't be the only focus," he said. "It has to be a holistic approach, which is education, which is mental health services."

Victims' families push for awareness

The families of fentanyl victims just want a spotlight on the crisis and

elected leaders to listen.

Brent Crawford, 31, was a loving husband and businessman who helped others recover from drug addiction before he relapsed into his own struggle, too ashamed to seek help.

Experts say being an addict these days is like playing Russian roulette, with illicit fentanyl the bullet in the chamber. Crawford, who lived in Southlake, died after overdosing on heroin, according to a medical examiner's report. His widow says a toxicology report revealed fentanyl in his system.

"Fentanyl was the drug that stopped my husband's heart, but the shame and the stigma is what really took his life, because when he started craving and struggling again, he was too ashamed to reach out," said Crawford's widow, Tina Crawford of Grapevine.

"We've got to stop that shame and that stigma. We certainly don't browbeat somebody that has diabetes that decides they're going to eat chocolate cake every day."

Since her husband's death, Crawford has been part of a local crusade to bring awareness about fentanyl.

Her efforts have included pushing politicians, from Abbott to her local leaders in Grand Prairie, to recognize the scope of the problem and develop policies that encompass not just holding criminals accountable, but providing funding and resources for treatment and awareness. She said she likes Abbott's commitment to solving the problem.

"It's so frustrating, because we need to use your voices," Crawford said of elected leaders and politicians. "They wait until it happens in their area or directly to them until they speak out."

Over the last two years, Crawford has organized several local events on fentanyl, where she invites elected officials. She also crusades on the issue through her rotary club. Activists generally pay for these events out of their pockets or through donations.

Lawmakers could help by increasing funding. "We are so underfunded and there is a lack of options and especially for treatment," she said. "There's AA and recovery meetings everywhere, but fentanyl is a whole different beast."

More brands of naloxone

Callie Crow, a paramedic who lost her 27-year-old son, Drew, to fentanyl, said the Legislature should allow Texans to use all tools to fight the drug, including more brands of naloxone, the intranasal agent that can save a person from overdosing. Texas has laws that promote the name brand Narcan.

"We're making some steps, but what's needed is a blanket policy for all opioid antagonists, not just for specific brands to be available," Crow said. "There are other products, such as injectables that are much more effective, that are not getting out there."

Crow joined the fentanyl fight in 2020. Her son was a student at the University of North Texas studying political journalism. A married man, he'd been addicted to opioids for 10 years before dying of secondary fentanyl toxicity.

"Unfortunately, I was unable to rescue my son from addiction," she said. "I've got a new perspective on addiction, and now it takes me to the streets to educate my peers about the use of naloxone."

Cynthia Pursley leads a nonprofit group called LIVEGY that donates

Narcan dispensers to North Texas bars and restaurants.

Pursley wants lawmakers to reconsider a bill authored by state Sen. Nathan Johnson to allow devices that detect fentanyl in drugs that are about to be consumed.

"For those that are using, testing their drugs has been shown to diminish the overdose numbers," she said. "It's about saving someone's life."

Pursley lost a stepson, who died after using drugs that contained fentanyl. "He died alone on the streets of San Francisco," she said.

One thing that is clear is that everyone in the [fentanyl](#) fight, from elected leaders to activists, agree it's going to be a long struggle.

"There's no question that this is an ongoing situation and it's not a one-and-done," Carney said. "There's no way it's going to get solved with just passing new laws. ... We need to get involved in education and mental health services, like before the kid wants to take a pill."

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