

COMMENTARY

Swift action needed to curb opioid epidemic, fentanyl deaths





April Babcock has put her energy into making parents, teens and young adults aware of the lethality of fentanyl, the opioid that caused her son Austen's death. Elijah Russell

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After listening to April Babcock speak and weep about the son she lost to a fentanyl overdose in 2019, I went to reports for that year and learned that Austen Babcock of Dundalk was one of the country's 70,630 drug overdose victims. Reports for 2020 are out and they're even worse — staggering, really, and almost too much to bear after a year when hundreds of thousands died from a virus.

But here it is, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: There were 87,203 overdose deaths across the country and 2,773 of them in Maryland. Our opioid epidemic continues.

Fentanyl, the synthetic pain killer, caused most of this death. In its illegal usage, fentanyl is frequently added to other drugs or sold as a pill. "Every household in America needs to know that word, fentanyl, and what it is and what can happen," says April Babcock, the grieving mother who has turned to making other parents aware of fentanyl's potency and its lethality to sometimes unwitting users. "And kids need to be scared. You are playing Russian roulette any time you take a pill or do any drug these days."

She believes Austen, who was 25 when he died, got into some crack laced with fentanyl and overdosed. She calls her son's death a "drug-induced homicide." (Police told her that Austen bought the crack from a 26-year-old drug dealer in Baltimore; that young man was shot to death nine months later.)

April Babcock tells a familiar story. Life events — particularly Austen's dismissal from his high school soccer team after two failing grades — threw him off course, and he started hanging out with other teenagers who did drugs. His drug and alcohol use snowballed, even as he held a job with a paving company. There was an arrest and then a court order for treatment but that proved difficult to arrange and afford. Austen promised his mother he would get into treatment, but he never did, and then one day it was too late. He died in his grandmother's house.

Fentanyl has added a horrible dimension to the nation's drug problem because of its deadly power. That so many use it speaks volumes about the state of the union. I look for joy as much as anyone, but it's impossible to ignore the deeply depressing fact that so many Americans turn to this drug, self-medicating at the risk of death.

The opioid crisis has caused U.S. life expectancy to drop. It is a symbol of our failings. As much as America hates to admit failings, we clearly need a serious and sustained focus on the drug epidemic or we'll be dealing with this tragic and unnecessary loss of life for years to come. Here are my suggestions.

Establish mandatory national public service for all Americans when they turn 18 so that those who feel lost at that age can, instead, be made to feel useful and associate with peers and supervisors who will encourage and lead them. Those who go to college can defer service until after graduation. But if, like the late Austen Babcock, you

come out of high school with brewing issues (drug and alcohol abuse, associating with others who are using), this will allow you to get away, do something for your country and feel better about yourself in a way that makes you less likely to use drugs.

Have the federal government fund the conversion of one prison in each state into a full-service drug treatment hospital for intensive residential therapy otherwise unaffordable for families like that of Austen Babcock's. It's one thing for politicians to promise alternatives to incarceration, it's quite another to have in place the comprehensive support services that people with addictions need. A special drug rehabilitation hospital, with state-run residential treatment, would mark a major change in the way we've been doing things for decades.

Baltimore officials should pull from the dusty archives the plan for Community Court scrapped by the tough-on-crime Martin O'Malley after he became mayor in 1999. Get the state or a private foundation to fund the court's location and startup staffing. The idea is to combine swift justice with an array of social services to help low-level repeat offenders break their cycle of crime and stay off the streets. It's a holistic approach to minor offenses, with the root causes of unhealthy behavior identified and addressed. I understand the intention of Baltimore State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby's recent decision not to prosecute low-level offenses. But they are still offenses, and Baltimoreans won't be happy when they call 911 about crowds on drug corners or suspected prostitution and see nothing done. With Community Court, the law still gets enforced but the goal of arrest and adjudication changes. The idea is to help people, not punish them for being poor or homeless, mentally unstable or addicted to drugs. It would take a while to establish Community Court, but once in place, Mosby could revisit her decision.

I've advocated all of this before, but it was April Babcock who got me thinking about it again.

And the numbers — 70,630 the year her son died, another 87,203 last year. The numbers are numbing, but they represent people, urban and suburban and rural, our fellow Americans. The biggest threats to our society are not coming from outside our borders — immigrants and international terror — but from within. And we haven't done enough, not nearly enough.