

Testimony of Mayor Martin J. Walsh
Joint Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse
November 16, 2015

As prepared for delivery

Good morning, Chairwoman **[Liz] Malia**, Chairwoman **[Jen] Flanagan** and members of the committee. Thank you for your commitment to this issue. It is an honor to be here today with Governor **[Charlie] Baker** and 1ST Assistant Attorney General **Chris Barry-Smith**.

I know everyone on this committee is aware of the toll that opioids are taking in our Commonwealth. In Boston, where our treatment systems serve patients from across the state, we see both the devastating impact of addiction and the current shortfalls in preventing and treating it.

We have been working hard to address this crisis. One of my first acts as Mayor was to make sure all our first responders are equipped to administer Narcan. Earlier this year, we created the nation's first municipal Office of Recovery Services, to promote access to treatment and begin building a continuum of care.

Despite our efforts, and despite sound legislative action in the past, opioid overdoses continue to rise. In Boston, not a day or a night goes by that our first responders are not at the scene of several overdoses. In every single case, someone's mother, father, son, or daughter is at risk of dying because of their addiction. And many are dying, as the numbers bear out.

It's time to take decisive action. Families and communities can't wait any longer. That is why I am standing with Governor Baker in support of the STEP Act [House Bill 3817, an Act Relative to Substance Use Treatment, Education, and Prevention]. I support this bill because I know from personal experience that to get people the help they need, we have to meet them where they are: whether that's on the street, in the hospital, at home, at work, or in school.

Help starts with education. This bill provides tools to help educate parents and children about the dangers of misusing opioids. And I am grateful that it provides a transportation plan for students attending recovery high schools.

Help means prevention. I agree with the Governor: a common-sense limit on first-time opioid prescriptions would provide an effective checkpoint to manage the flow of addictive narcotics into our homes and communities.

And help sometimes requires intervention. More than once, I've seen the journey of recovery begin with involuntary treatment. Providing this tool as a last resort in medical settings flows from our conviction that addiction is a disease. An assessment period is not a punishment. It's a lifeline.

I want to thank this committee for acting favorably on related legislation that I filed as a Representative. House Bill 1806 would allow judges to offer treatment alternatives to nonviolent drug offenders. I ask that this bill be folded into any omnibus substance abuse legislation taken up by the Legislature.

Finally, it is critical that the state make a strong financial commitment to the measures in this bill, and to the overall continuum of care. As **Governor Baker** and his team prepare the FY17 budget, I am optimistic that funding will increase for transitional care and longer term residential care, to reduce wait times for those services. For those awaiting treatment, the City of Boston will provide recovery coaches, peer support, and family support. I ask the state to join us in extending these vital bridges to sobriety.

I know I am making many requests of the state. Rest assured, I am advancing the same level of commitment by the City. Please consider me a willing and supportive partner in your efforts. We need to work together towards a comprehensive continuum of care. We need to tackle this crisis on all fronts.

In closing, as you hear debate on various aspects of this bill, I ask you to keep in mind the bigger picture. This crisis has been building for many years. The time for working around the edges is over. We know what is needed. We need to invest in prevention. We need to build our treatment capacity. And we need to say to those in active addiction and their families: we care enough to meet you where you are, and get you the help you need.

Thank you.