

# 'Time to heal New York': AG James unveils funds in Utica to fight substance use disorder

**Amy Neff Roth** Observer-Dispatch

Oneida County will receive as much as \$4.2 million from the state to spend on prevention, education, treatment and recovery support for substance use disorder, New York state Attorney General Letitia James promised at a Tuesday morning press conference in Utica.

The money, which will be \$2.4 million at a minimum, comes from settlements of state lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies and distributors for their role in the opioid epidemic. Herkimer County will receive between \$568,835 and \$982,214.

In total, the state will give up to \$1.5 billion to counties to fight substance abuse, said James, who is visiting dozens of counties this month to announce the funding in what her office calls a HealNY tour.

“It’s time to turn the tide of the opioid drug crisis,” James said at the Center for Family Life and Recovery in Utica. “It’s time to heal New York.”

It’s time, she said, for the drug companies to pay for the substance use epidemic that they started by not admitting that their painkillers are addictive.

The drug epidemic’s toll has gotten higher during the COVID-19 pandemic, she noted, as isolation increased and access to services decreased. More Americans fatally overdosed in 2020 than ever before, she said.

## Local reaction

A who's who of local officials spoke during the press briefing, thanking James for her efforts to win the funding and expressing the need for action.

Eric Rodriguez, a peer advocate at the Center for Family Life and Recovery who is studying to become a substance abuse counselor, talked about his past, which included heroin addiction, incarceration, gang membership and a “scary” rap sheet. But now he meditates, he has a job, he helps people, he said.

“Addicts are humans and we’re capable of change,” Rodriguez said.

The money from the settlements will help to employ people who can check in with people with substance use disorder to see what help they need and to help more of them turn their lives around, the kind of help he could have used in his past, he said.

Katie Burns, another peer advocate who is in recovery, spoke about her work, which includes outreach to Oneida Square and other hard-hit areas in the county.

She’s said she’s able to reach out to people with substance use disorder, mental health issues and a history of domestic abuse with understanding because of her own past, trying to give them the kind of help she once could have used.

“Anything that the community needs, I am willing to go above and beyond,” she said.

On Oneida Square the intersection of homelessness, mental health issues and drug use come together in the group of people who frequently hang out there, Mayor Robert Palmieri said. The city and the county have been working on a plan, to be released soon, to address the different problems that meet in the square, he said.

The goal is to help others achieve what Burns and Rodriguez have achieved, Palmieri said.

And although the issues may be most visible on the square, they arise in every part of the county, county Executive Anthony Picente noted.

## About the funds

It's not clear, though, exactly when the money will make it to Oneida County or where it will go. It's currently locked into an opioid settlement fund to fight the opioid epidemic with prevention, education, treatment and outreach. It's also possible that funding could be used for higher salaries for people who work in the field, James said, acknowledging the difficulties the human services fields have had in recruiting and retaining employees given relatively low wages.

The state is forming an opioid committee that will determine how projects get funded, James said.

The money to be distributed comes from settlements of a 2019 lawsuit filed by the attorney general against manufacturers and distributors who had marketed opioid painkillers to health care providers, fueling a surge in prescriptions and in addiction over the past two decades. Settlements reached with Johnson & Johnson, Endo Health Solutions, McKesson Corporation, Cardinal Health Inc. and Amerisource Bergen Drug Corporation make up the money currently being distributed.

At least another \$200 million will be distributed from a settlement with Purdue Pharma and the Sackler family, which owns it. Cases against several other companies are either in trial or moving through bankruptcy court.

*Amy Roth is the health and education reporter for the Observer-Dispatch.  
Email Amy Roth at [aroth@gannett.com](mailto:aroth@gannett.com).*