Philadelphia Mourns the Unexpected Loss of a Harm Reduction Advocate

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Philadelphia's harm reduction community is mourning the unexpected loss of Paul Yabor, an HIV, hepatitis C virus (HCV) and addiction-treatment advocate who had devoted his life to serving people in recovery. Yabor was 55 years old and died of an apparent overdose, Newsworks reports.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Yabor's personal struggle with addiction began in the 1980s, during which time he was diagnosed with AIDS and later, while serving time in prison, hepatitis C. In response to the diagnoses, Yabor became an activist with ACT UP and several harm reduction groups across the city.

Yabor lobbied the U.S government for the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS and advocated for expanded access to hepatitis C treatment, needle exchange services for people who use drugs and overdose prevention. He also helped lead the campaign to create the Philadelphia Land Bank, a program that helps simplify the city's acquisition and sale of vacant land for housing and other community projects.

Yabor's friends, family and fellow advocates say his death in the midst of Philadelphia's ongoing opioid epidemic comes as a complete shock and serves as a reminder of all the work that still needs to be done to help support people in recovery.

According to the Philadelphia medical examiner's office, Yabor died of an overdose while alone near a site popular among injection drug users where he had helped others many times.

"I think it makes people much more humble about how challenging addiction is and how challenging recovery is," said Silvana Mazzella, of Prevention Point, a harm reduction group Yabor had been involved with. "It really tells me we need to break down stigma; we need to make it an open door when you are using, an open door when you relapse and really support people."