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**TOP STORIES**

# SUFFOLK: GET



Cuomo

Nixon

## Cuomo, Nixon to face off

BY YANCEY ROY  
[yancey.roy@newsday.com](mailto:yancey.roy@newsday.com)

Finally, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and challenger Cynthia Nixon will square off in a televised debate, set for Hofstra University on Aug. 29, two weeks before the Democratic primary.

Cuomo, who had rebuffed previous invitations, has agreed to participate in a debate hosted by WCBS, according to a statement issued Monday by Byron Brown, the Buffalo mayor and the chairman of the state Democratic Committee.

It would be held at Hofstra University before a live audience, a source said.

"CBS has offered to host a gubernatorial debate on August 29th, an invitation which Governor Cuomo has accepted," Brown said in a statement.

Nixon had been chiding the incumbent for months for not agreeing to debate and had accepted previous similar offers from WABC-TV and NY-1.

Nixon accepted the debate invitation at Hofstra, even though her campaign was given no input on format, time or other terms, spokeswoman Rebecca Katz said.

"The result: a debate at Andrew Cuomo's chosen location and TV station, in his preferred format, with a favorable audience, and on a date in the last week of August when a minimum of New Yorkers will be watching," Katz said, adding: "Cynthia will debate Governor Cuomo backwards and in high heels if she has to."

This will be the first one-on-one debate Cuomo has had in 12 years. He didn't debate Zephyr Teachout, his challenger in a Democratic primary in 2014.

In the general election campaigns of 2014 and 2010, he wouldn't debate the Republican nominees head-on, but agreed to participate in forums that included several minor-party candidates.

## County offers nonviolent drug offenders 90-day plan

BY MICHAEL O'KEEFFE  
[michael.okeeffe@newsday.com](mailto:michael.okeeffe@newsday.com)

Suffolk officials rolled out a program Monday that offers nonviolent drug offenders treatment to avoid criminal charges, the county's latest strategy to stem an opioid epidemic responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Long Islanders last year.

Designed by prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges and court officials, the "Comprehensive Addiction Recovery and Education Program" — or C.A.R.E. — works as an incentive for defendants to complete 90 days in drug treatment and have their cases dismissed, county leaders said during a news conference at Suffolk County Court in Central Islip.

"This is the latest tool in our arsenal to combat the drug epidemic facing our communities," Suffolk District Attorney Timothy Sini said. "The goal of the program is to divert low-level offenders who commit nonviolent crimes due to substance abuse disorders away from the criminal justice system and into treatment where they can get the help they need."

Defendants in the C.A.R.E. program will be evaluated by the Suffolk County Drug Treatment Team for appropriate treatment plans. Their cases will be sealed once they finish, said Suffolk County District Administrative Judge C. Randall Hinrichs.

The program will operate in addition to the Suffolk County Drug Treatment Court, officials said, but unlike the drug court, C.A.R.E. defendants will not be required to enter a guilty plea in exchange for treatment.

"Many in the defense bar



Suffolk District Attorney Timothy Sini announces the creation of

claim it is a significant impediment," Sini said of the requirement. "C.A.R.E. removes that . . . with the objective of further incentivizing defendants to participate in treatment."

Defendants in Suffolk drug court are required to participate in treatment for at least 12 months on misdemeanors and 18 months for felony charges.

Officials said the C.A.R.E. program is open to defendants with minimal or no criminal record and no history of violence or gang involvement. About 600 people charged with crimes between April and June would be eligible.

Bohemia defense attorney

Harry Tilis, president of the Suffolk County Criminal Bar Association, called the C.A.R.E. program's emphasis on treatment "a seismic shift" in the way law-enforcement officials approach the opioid epidemic.

"It is a huge opportunity for the sick and suffering in our communities and their families to get on the road to recovery," Tilis said.

An estimated 600 people died from drug overdoses in Suffolk and Nassau in 2017, according to the counties' medical examiner offices. The number of fatal drug overdoses nationwide stood at nearly 64,000 in 2016, federal statistics show.

# TREATED, NO DRUG RAP



the new drug treatment program for nonviolent drug offenders.

Nassau courts offer drug-diversion programs similar to C.A.R.E. But in Nassau's "Drug Treatment Alternative to Prison," decisions on eligibility and whether completing treatment eliminates criminal charges and sentencing are made case-by-case, according to the county's Executive Assistant District Attorney Maureen McCormick. The Nassau County Misdemeanor Drug Treatment Court, meanwhile, diverts defendants charged with a misdemeanor into drug treatment.

Addiction expert Jeffrey Reynolds called the new program a wise approach to an opioid epidemic that has ravaged

thousands of Long Island families. Reynolds, the president of the Mineola-based Family and Children's Association, said C.A.R.E. "provides for earlier diversion into treatment for low-level offenders . . . and may help end a revolving door of arrests, court dates and jail sentences."

Sini said defendants eligible for the C.A.R.E. program are more ethnically diverse than those in Suffolk's drug court.

"Thus, not only will this program increase the number of defendants in treatment," he said, "it will ensure that all defendants — no matter what race or ethnicity — have an opportunity to benefit from this program."



Authorities displayed several items as evidence in the arrest of Benji Diskin of Wantagh on Monday.

## Wantagh man facing drug charges tied to three ODs

BY BRIDGET MURPHY  
bridget.murphy@newsday.com

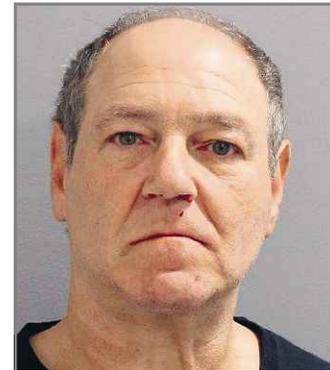
A Wantagh man who allegedly racked up thousands of dollars in weekly drug sales is behind bars on multiple felony charges after a bust Saturday that police said led to a \$20,000 drug stash and evidence linking him to two fatal overdoses.

Nassau Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder said at a Monday news conference that officials believe there is a connection between Benji Diskin, 61, and two drug overdose deaths in Suffolk along with one non-fatal overdose in Nassau, all this year.

Court records show Diskin pleaded not guilty to several drug offenses in Hempstead district court Sunday before a judge set his bond at \$200,000. Ryder confirmed Diskin could face more charges but declined to elaborate on what he called an ongoing probe, saying, "I can't discuss the details of it."

Law enforcement officials said the probe was part of what they've dubbed Operation Natalie, a multipronged attack on Nassau's opioids crisis, namely education, awareness, enforcement, diversion and treatment.

Diskin's arrest grew out of a



Benji Diskin, 61, of Wantagh

long-term investigation by the Long Island Heroin Task Force, according to authorities, who said he sold about \$36,000 in drugs every week, stashing them in his home and in an Amityville storage unit.

Police said they seized heroin, cocaine, crack, oxycodone, Suboxone, clonazepam and about \$9,500 in cash after searches Sunday morning at those two locations. Among other items recovered were soda cans with false tops that popped off so drugs could be hidden inside, scales and drug packaging, according to police.

On Saturday evening, detectives saw Diskin park a

Hyundai Elantra on Grove Street off Railroad Avenue in Wantagh before another man got into the backseat and gave Diskin money, according to a felony complaint.

Diskin gave the man a red plastic bag with cocaine inside that police later seized, while also arresting that man, court records show.

Police charged Diskin, of the 300 block of Twin Lane South, with seven counts of criminal possession of a controlled substance, including one second-degree count, five third-degree counts and one fourth-degree count. He also faces two counts of criminal sale of a controlled substance, according to officials.

Ryder said Diskin had 24 arrests since 1977, and state records show he has served multiple upstate prison sentences for drug-related crimes.

Nassau County Executive Laura Curran said Monday that although Diskin "is not a pharmacist," he sold "a wide variety of drugs." She added that while enforcement alone can't solve the opioid crisis, it is "an incredibly important part of making sure that we hold dealers accountable and keep our families and our communities safe."

DANIEL GOODRICH

NCPI