

There probably aren't many women in America with a better sense of how many moms are struggling to raise children who were exposed to opioids in the womb – and how little is known about the medical and developmental effects their kids face – than Kathy Strain.

A leading activist in the fight against opioid abuse, the Pennsylvania woman regularly talks with worried moms or family members as a statewide moderator for a popular internet message board called The Addict's Mom. What she's learned is that once hospitals send babies home after a few weeks in intensive care to wean them off drug dependency, mothers often remain unaware their children may face long-term difficulties.

"It really is a big group of kids," said Strain, referring as many as 250,000 children born every year in America with problems related to opioid exposure, "with all of the issues, and nobody knows." She talks regular to family members who worry about physical symptoms like clenched jaws or grinding teeth, or who face developmental or psychological difficulties such as attention-deficit problems, autism-like symptoms or memory issues.

She sees the current legal actions against America's biggest pharmaceutical companies, which aggressively marketed these addictive painkillers, as a way to get what these children are lacking: Long-term medical monitoring that will both help doctors learn more about the lingering effects of opioid exposure and aid kids in getting better treatment.

"We owe it to these kids -- and future generations – to develop a tracking system and to study and see why developmental delays and defects may be happening with these children," said Strain.

Strain has been asking the hard questions about the opioid crisis in America ever since early in the 2010s, when two of her children became dependent upon the drugs, including her son who eventually died from an overdose while seeking treatment. At first, she said she struggled to focus at work -- losing her job and going on unemployment for a time. But eventually she learned to channel some of the pain she experienced into helping others.

Strain, who lives in Berks County about an hour west of Philadelphia, overcame her fears of public speaking when the county asked her to give a talk about the opioid crisis. "I didn't want any family to experience the shame and the stigma that I'd felt," she said.

After signing up as a volunteer coach with the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, she became a moderator with The Addict's Mom – which maintains highly active websites in all 50 states – and a local leader with Not One More, a family support group. She also now works for the state of Pennsylvania in a program aimed at ending drug abuse in the workplace, and recently appeared in an ad for the Stop Opioid Silence campaign.

Today, Strain says there is still so much work to be done to educate both would-be mothers and their doctors about the risks.

"Women in that age group where they could conceive need to be made aware of the danger," she said. "That wasn't happening, and I don't know that that's happening now."