

Opening Statement of Senator Portman
“Examining the Impact of the Opioid Epidemic in Ohio”
April 22, 2016

Thank you all for joining me in this critical field hearing, and for helping to call attention to the need to address the epidemic of drug addiction that is devastating so many communities in all of our states.

Every day, we lose more than 120 Americans to drug overdoses. Nationally, from 2000 to 2014, the rate of overdose deaths doubled, leaving nearly half a million Americans dead from drug overdoses.

Unfortunately, it is especially hurting us right here in of Ohio.

I read some deeply saddening news in the Cincinnati Enquirer last week. According to Interact for Health’s annual Ohio Health Issues Poll, in 2014, two out of every 10 Ohioans knew someone who was abusing prescription drugs; in the latest poll, it’s three in 10. And out of those three in 10, four in 10 know someone who has overdosed. These percentages have been increasing across age groups, across education levels, and across income levels.

About five of those 120 Americans we lose every day are Ohioans. Since 2007, drug overdoses have killed more Ohioans than have car accidents. Statewide, overdose deaths more than tripled from 1999 to 2010, and we’re told that about 200,000 Ohioans are addicted to opioids right now. More than 20,000 will overdose this year, and several thousand may lose their lives.

This epidemic is not slowing down. Our response cannot slow down. We don’t have time to waste.

The Senate has done important work so far. The Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, or CARA, which the Senate passed 94 to 1, is an indispensable step in the right direction. CARA will make improvements in prevention, education, and treatment alike. It will make the naloxone that has saved thousands of lives in Ohio more available and train our first responders on how to

use it. I have repeatedly urged my colleagues in the House to pass CARA, and I will continue to speak out, even if that means going against leaders in my own party.

We're here in Cleveland, which is arguably one of the regions in Ohio that is hardest hit. The statistics are heartbreaking, and they are a call to action for us as legislators. In Cleveland, from March 10—the day the Senate passed CARA 94 to 1—to March 27, 29 people died of overdoses. That's just one 17-day period in just one city.

In one long weekend, eight men and four women died of overdoses. Twelve Ohioans. That includes a 21 year old and a 64 year old. Some of the victims were white; some were African-American. This is affecting all of us.

And increasingly overdose deaths are being driven by fentanyl, which we're told can be up to 100 times more potent than heroin. In 2013, 5 people in Cleveland died of overdoses of fentanyl. In 2014, that number increased more than 700% to 37. The next year, that number more than doubled, to 89. These rapid increases are alarming, and there does not appear to be any sign that they are slowing down.

In Fairview Park, which is not far from here, we had one case last month where a man overdosed at a McDonalds—in a public, busy place. I thank God that someone was able to save his life with naloxone. But it just shows the extent of the problem: this is happening in broad daylight, and in places where children are present.

I've spent a lot of time in Cleveland speaking with advocates, doctors, and patients. My wife, Jane, and I have toured the Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital right here. We saw firsthand babies who were born to mothers who are addicted, babies who were addicted in the women and were born addicted. They're so small that they could fit in the palm of your hand, and they have to go through the drug withdrawal process. Doctors don't fully know the long-term consequences of this process.

Cleveland has a lot to teach the country about how serious the threat of addiction is, as well as about effective prevention and treatment.

There is still much more to do after CARA. We ought to inform our future efforts by listening to the experts. That is the approach we took to developing CARA, and that is why it is such an effective piece of legislation.

Cleveland has suffered so much from this epidemic, but also possesses some of the best doctors, nurses, and caregivers, some of the most passionate advocates, and some of the most effective coalitions with whom we could consult, so I am grateful for this field hearing. That includes, especially, some of the compassionate and gifted people who work in this facility.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, who represent a broad spectrum of experience and backgrounds- we will hear more about neonatal abstinence syndrome, fentanyl related overdoses, medication-assisted treatment, the use of naloxone, and what we can do to prevent drug abuse in the first place.