

Chair Maggie Hassan

Emerging Threats and Spending Oversight Subcommittee

Hearing on “Strengthening International Cooperation to Stop the Flow of Fentanyl into the United States”

March 20, 2024

OPENING STATEMENT

Good afternoon. Today’s hearing will focus on the steps that U.S. agencies and foreign countries need to take to stop the flow of fentanyl into the United States.

The vast majority of fentanyl and now other powerful synthetic opioids aren’t being produced in the United States; these drugs come from international drug cartels. And we know that these cartels have international supply chains, Mexican drug cartels, for instance, order precursor chemicals used to make fentanyl or other synthetic opioids from chemical manufacturers in China. Then the cartels synthesize the opioids in Mexico and smuggle the drugs across the southwest U.S. border. U.S. and international authorities must work together to dismantle these transnational criminal organizations and cut off their supplies, money, and illegal weapons.

Today’s hearing is an opportunity to look at the specific steps that Congress needs to take to disrupt the fentanyl supply chain and dismantle the deadly and violent criminal organizations that dominate the trade. And we need to develop these strategies with the understanding that the cartels are nimble – constantly shifting their methods to circumvent the law.

We also need to recognize that these cartels take advantage of our current crisis at the Southern Border – so we need, urgently, to strengthen our defenses there. We should provide more resources to border agencies, hire more personnel, and deploy more equipment that can detect drugs in all kinds of vehicles.

However, as I noted, to have a lasting impact on the flow of fentanyl into our country, we need to work with our international partners to fully dismantle the drug cartels producing and supplying the drugs. When I participated in a bipartisan congressional delegation to China last fall, I pressed President Xi to do more to stop the manufacturing and exportation of fentanyl precursor chemicals. President Biden held a summit with President Xi a month later, and since then the Chinese government has said that it would do more to crack down on drug trafficking and target the profits of illegal drug and precursor chemical exports.

We have to hold China accountable and push them to implement reasonable, common-sense controls to limit illegal chemical exports. Yet China continues to resist calls to implement “Know Your Customer” protocols for its chemical sector. These protocols would require that companies verify that their customers have a legitimate purpose for dual-use chemicals and would make it much more difficult for drug cartels to purchase the chemicals that they need to make fentanyl. We must exert more diplomatic pressure to get this done, including working with other major Chinese trading partners to force changes.

U.S. agencies should also take steps to improve coordination and information sharing with Mexican authorities. The drug cartels operating in Mexico are extremely powerful. Their dangerous influence has corrupted officials at all levels of government. In the face of these challenges, we have to find reliable partners to dismantle the drug cartels.

One of the ways to dismantle and defeat the cartels is by depriving them of the money and illegal weapons that they smuggle across the southern border from the United States, something that Mexican officials have stressed to me in my two Congressional trips there. Cartels use these weapons and money to seize control of Mexican communities and bribe or kill officials. That is why I have worked with Senator Lankford to introduce the Enhancing Southbound Inspections to Combat Cartels Act. This bill requires that the Department of Homeland Security increase its inspections of vehicles and pedestrians traveling into Mexico. These inspections will help us prevent the flow of illicit money and weapons. The bill also authorizes additional resources for the border and law enforcement agencies that are responsible for inspections and investigations. I hope that the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee will consider this legislation soon.

No one law alone will address the fentanyl crisis. Fentanyl is inexpensive to make and transport, and it is in high demand. It will continue to take an all-hands-on-deck approach to dismantle the cartels, crack down on the spread of illicit fentanyl, and protect our communities. That's why while we work to combat the cartels, we should also take steps to strengthen resources for people dealing with addiction to make sure that anyone who needs treatment and recovery services can access them.

Today, though, I look forward to discussing how we can disrupt fentanyl supplies and dismantle drug cartels with our three insightful witnesses. People in every corner of the country – including my home state of New Hampshire – have had their families and communities destroyed by the fentanyl crisis. We must do everything that we can to dismantle and defeat the cartels. We cannot relent in our efforts to build a safer future for our country and our children.