

Opening Statement of Senator Sherrod Brown
“Examining the Impact of the Opioid Epidemic in Ohio”

Friday, April 22, 2016

As prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Senator Portman, for inviting me to be an honorary member of the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee for the purposes of this field hearing today.

Thank you also to Senator Carper and Senator Johnson and their staffs for their help in organizing this important hearing on the Opioid Epidemic in Ohio.

But thank you most of all to those of you who are spending your Friday mornings here with us to testify on an issue about which you know all too well.

It's about time members of Congress come together in a bipartisan way and take action on the opioid addiction epidemic that is devastating communities across our country.

We have failed to sufficiently invest in mental health care and treatment for addiction and substance abuse for too long. Now that we are experiencing a record number of fatal overdoses, it is impossible to ignore these issues any longer.

As everyone here knows all too well, in one year alone, nearly 2,500 Ohio families lost a loved one to addiction – and thousands more continue to struggle with opioid abuse or with a family member's addiction.

Addiction isn't an individual problem or a character flaw – it's a chronic disease. And right now, it's placing an unbearable burden on our families, our communities, and our health care system.

This issue has hit every community across the country, but it is particularly acute here in Northeast Ohio.

Last year in Cuyahoga County, at least one Ohioan died every day from a drug overdose.

While deaths related to heroin decreased, deaths as a result of Fentanyl [fen-tan-ill], a powerful synthetic opiate, increased.

We cannot continue to make progress against one drug but have another more dangerous and more lethal version pop up in its place.

And as we work to fight against this epidemic, we cannot afford to forget the human cost of inaction.

I am proud that we are starting to tackle this epidemic at the national level, and I am encouraged by the Senate's passage of Senator Portman's bill – the *Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act* (CARA), which included a provision I authored with Senator Toomey from Pennsylvania.

But CARA – even if it gets passed into law – is not enough. This bill, which we are all hopeful the House will take up soon, is just a first step.

On its own, this legislation is not nearly enough to put a dent in this epidemic.

The initiatives in CARA are going to mean very little without additional funding to back them up.

We need to ensure our communities have access to affordable naloxone, which reversed 166 heroin- or fentanyl-related overdoses in Cuyahoga County in 2015.

This requires funding, yes. But to truly fight this epidemic, we need to do more.

We need funding but we also must build upon the community-based structures and supports that already exist to do more prevention, educate our children on the danger of these drugs, give our health providers the tools they need to fight pain without opioids, and – most importantly – increase access to treatment.

I have held several roundtables around the state of Ohio to learn from communities and health professionals on what they need to make progress in this fight.

During a roundtable I held in Chillicothe, Ohio, we heard over and over how important funding is for prevention. The community organizations and local governments are already stretched thin – in both time and resources – dealing with the increasing number of residents who struggle with addiction.

They don't have the time or the resources they know that they need to educate their communities about prevention.

We need real investment in prevention programs. We need real investment in treatment options that help patients not just get clean, but stay clean.

In public health emergencies, we are somehow always able to come up with the necessary money – whether it's Swine Flu or Ebola. Hopefully, we will now provide money to address the emerging Zika virus.

But while we support these important efforts, we must recognize that addiction is also a public health emergency. You can't look at the spike in the number of deaths and conclude anything else.

I am disappointed that Congress has been unwilling to come together to invest in this epidemic and give our communities the support they need to fight this epidemic.

It's time for us to get serious, and call this what it is – a public health crisis that demands real, immediate investment.

We look forward to hearing the witness testimony today so that Senator Portman and I can bring back your stories and suggestions to our colleagues in Washington and urge them to do more.

Thank you.