

Statement of Ranking Member Tom Carper
“America’s Insatiable Demand for Drugs: Assessing the Federal Response”

Tuesday, May 17, 2016

As prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing today to examine the federal government’s efforts to stem the demand for illegal drugs and treat the substance abuse disorders that fuel it. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on this difficult issue that has developed into a health emergency across the country and to learning more about what the federal government is doing and should be doing to address the root causes of this complex challenge.

As we all know, substance abuse, particularly prescription opioid and heroin abuse, has been a growing problem in our country for a number of years now. According to the Centers for Disease Control, there has been a dramatic increase in opioid-related overdoses in recent years with the number of incidents actually quadrupling since 2000. And opioids, primarily prescription pain relievers and heroin, are the main cause of overdose deaths. All told, there were just over 47,000 drug overdose deaths in 2014 in our country, up from just under 44,000 in 2013, a more than six percent increase in just one year. Even when drug abuse is not deadly, it inflicts other damage, not just on those doing the drugs, but also their families and communities. And we must also be honest about how our country’s demand for drugs has fueled violence and disorder in Mexico and much of Central America, breaking down communities and touching families throughout the region.

This committee is familiar with the work the Department of Homeland Security and others do at and around our borders to stop the supply of illicit drugs coming into our country. But as former SouthCOMM Commander General Kelly has told us, we cannot intercept our way out of this problem. We must do more to address the demand for drugs. That means looking at the challenge we face as a public health crisis, not just a law enforcement issue.

Simply put, substance abuse issues are complex and require a robust and comprehensive response. We of course need to make sure that our law enforcement agencies have the tools and resources they need to combat drug traffickers and reduce the supply drugs available in our country. But we also need to make sure we’re investing in public health and funding treatment and other initiatives that can reduce the demand for drugs. We also need to ensure that these efforts are well coordinated, and that the agencies involved are working effectively with states and localities.

That’s why I’m pleased to see that the individual responsible for our national drug control efforts, the Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, Michael Botticelli, is here to provide insight into what the Obama Administration has done in the last several years to address these issues. I’m also pleased to see that the Principal Deputy Administrator at the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Ms. Kana Enomoto, is here to provide us with information on the government’s efforts to prevent and treat substance abuse disorders, as we all know that treatment and prevention are crucial if we want to reduce the

demand for drugs. Additionally, Ms. Diana Maurer, Director of Homeland Security and Justice at the GAO, will provide us with an overview of the progress made toward our national drug control strategy goals and the work that remains to be done in this area.

In sum, this problem we're facing is complex, and the potential solutions are neither quick nor easy. Getting a handle on drug abuse and substance abuse disorders and the tragic problems that stem from them both in our communities, and in neighboring countries, will require an all-hands-on-deck effort. Again, my thanks to our Chairman for holding this hearing and to our witnesses for their contributions. I look forward to reviewing our federal efforts to reduce the supply and demand for illegal drugs.