

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson

“All Hands on Deck: Working Together to End the Trafficking and Abuse of Prescription Opioids, Heroin and Fentanyl”

September 14, 2015

Sen. Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) chaired this hearing. Sen. Johnson submitted the following opening statement for the record:

This congress, the committee has spent a great deal of time uncovering and defining the problems occurring at our borders. The accumulated testimony from our eight hearings and one public roundtable indicates that America’s borders are not secure. One key indicator of our insecure border is the fact that we are interdicting only 5 to 10 percent of illegal drugs crossing our southwest border.

Today, the committee will explore how our insecure southwest border has become a gateway for drug traffickers to distribute illicit drugs across the country, particularly affecting states in the Northeast and Midwest. I want to thank Senator Ayotte, a trusted and valuable member of the committee, for proposing and organizing this very important hearing.

New England is facing a heroin epidemic. An overwhelming majority of federal, state and local law enforcement respondents indicate that heroin is the top drug threat in the region. New Hampshire, in particular, has seen a huge rise in heroin overdose deaths—from 16 in 2008 to nearly 250 overdoses related to heroin, fentanyl or a combination in 2014.

The Midwest has also been greatly affected by this epidemic. In Wisconsin, the price of heroin is at a four-year low and the number of deaths caused by heroin overdoses is on the rise. Between 2008 and 2012, heroin overdose deaths in Wisconsin tripled. While Wisconsin averaged only 29 heroin deaths a year from 2000 to 2007, in 2014 more than 200 heroin-related deaths occurred in Wisconsin. In Milwaukee County alone, 119 heroin-related deaths occurred in 2014.

For the most part, heroin enters the United States through our southwest land border via Mexican cartels and is then trafficked to major cities such as Chicago and New York City by drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). DTOs then distribute heroin into communities in New Hampshire and Wisconsin through criminal gangs.

Mexican cartels appear to be responding to the increased demand for heroin in the U.S. and heroin is transiting the border in greater volumes and in larger shipments. Until we take border security seriously in this country, heroin will continue to enter the supply chain through our southwest border to be distributed across all 50 states.

Today, the committee will hear very important, local perspectives defining the heroin epidemic occurring in small towns across the country. New Hampshire has been particularly devastated, and we will hear how law enforcement, treatment centers and families are addressing this issue. We will then hear from a federal panel that consists of the U.S. drug czar, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection commissioner and the Drug Enforcement Administration to understand interdiction efforts and ways to stop both the supply and demand for this deadly drug.

I thank the witnesses for their willingness to provide these important insights. I would also like to again extend a special thanks to Senator Ayotte for highlighting this issue and calling for a hearing to examine much needed solutions to this growing public health crisis.

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