

Opening Statement of Sen. McCain
“America’s Heroin Epidemic at the Border: Local, State, and Federal Law Enforcement
Efforts to Combat Illicit Narcotic Trafficking”
November 23, 2015

Mr. Chairman, thank you for agreeing to hold this field hearing in Arizona. As we will soon hear from the witnesses today, our state has the dubious distinction of being the primary entry point, trafficking corridor and distribution hub for drugs transported from Mexico to the United States by the Sinaloa Cartel.

We have made progress in securing our border. The reduction in apprehensions demonstrates the effectiveness of the men and women of the Border Patrol in preventing the illegal entry of people crossing the border. Increased surveillance towers and other technologies will only increase that effectiveness.

But clearly, we are losing the war with the transnational criminal organizations that bring illicit narcotics into our country. The demand for these drugs – heroin, methamphetamine and cocaine – is too high and the profits the cartels make are too great to simply dissuade these criminals from trafficking drugs across the border. We of course must improve our drug interdiction strategy, but we must also do what is necessary to reduce the demand for these drugs.

The threat to Arizona is not just that it has become a drug corridor. These drugs stay in our state, poisoning our children and doing great harm to our communities. Deaths and overdoses from heroin are skyrocketing. According the Arizona Department of Health Services, heroin-related heaths increased from less than 50 in 2004 to almost 200 in 2014.

The reality is, we are not going to stop all of these drugs at the border or at our ports of entry. That is why it is critical that we use our intelligence capabilities and strengthen partnerships between federal, state and local law enforcement to combat these drug traffickers.

Border Patrol has long used the term ‘defense in depth,’ and that description applies here as we work to stop illegal trafficking of drugs. That is why I am intrigued by the governor’s plan to create a new drug interdiction strike force to work as a true partner to federal and local officials to intercept narcotics on the highways and bi-ways that cross the border.

Finally, while this hearing is focused on heroin trafficking, the transnational criminal organizations that are bringing these drugs into the United States do not limit themselves to narcotics. They control the smuggling routes and routinely traffic humans, currency, and other illicit activities. In recent months, we’ve seen Special Interest Aliens from Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries pay Mexican nationals to smuggle them into the United States. No one crosses the border without these cartels’ permission, indicating their clear complicity in smuggling these Special Interest Aliens into the country.

Once again, I thank Chairman Johnson for holding this hearing and the witnesses for appearing and providing testimony on this critical issue to Arizona and the nation.