

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR PETERS
JANUARY 17, 2018

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this important hearing, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I would also like to welcome our new colleague Senator Doug Jones to the Committee. We look forward to working with you.

Medicaid expansion has produced not only historic coverage gains, but also far reaching positive health effects for American families.

At its core Medicaid and the ACA's Medicaid expansion are critical programs that help hard working American families enroll in health care coverage and protect our nations most vulnerable.

Nearly 80 percent of Medicaid enrollees come from a working family and over 40 percent of Medicaid enrollees are children.

Medicaid is a program that saves lives.

I think we can all agree that when you or a family member or a friend gets sick or hurt – we should be able to access affordable health care coverage.

Medicaid and Medicaid expansion serves as that bridge to affordable health care for millions of working families in our country.

I am sure we have all heard the stories, but as a reminder – these programs are there to make sure someone’s parent can have that needed surgery or a child’s family can afford the high cost of their cancer treatment or that a person that’s been injured can get the care they need to recover and get back to work.

Medicaid has also been critical to fighting the opioid epidemic.

Opioid abuse – and its tragic impact – continues to be a growing problem in my home state of Michigan and around the nation.

Between 2014 and 2015 the Centers for Disease Control reports that drug overdose deaths in Michigan increased by over 13 percent.

In 2015, more than 2 million people across the nation struggled with a prescription pain reliever substance abuse disorder – an unfortunate number that continues to trend upward.

As we work to combat this serious epidemic - the Affordable Care Act has greatly expanded access to treatment in Michigan and around the nation – including for individuals with substance abuse disorders.

Prior to passage of the ACA, many individuals with substance abuse disorders were unable to get access to the care they needed.

Since passage of the Affordable Care Act, the uninsured rate in Michigan has been cut in half and more than 600,000 individuals are now enrolled in our states Healthy Michigan expanded Medicaid program.

Combined with the private exchange in our state nearly 900,000 individuals in Michigan have coverage through the Affordable Care Act - many of these individuals are accessing health insurance for the first time in their lives.

Since the ACA's Medicaid expansion went into effect more than 1.6 million Americans have gained access to substance abuse treatment.

Last year, the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations had a hearing on the opioid epidemic we heard from witnesses who – like you – are fighting this crisis on the frontlines.

I spoke with Dr. Thomas Gilson a Medical Examiner from Cuyahoga County who told me how Medicaid expansion is literally helping them save lives by getting people suffering from addiction into treatment.

I also spoke with Thomas Synan Jr. Chief of Police for Newtown, Ohio. He largely agreed with Dr. Wilson and went on to tell me:

“To reduce demand and in turn reduce supply we have to get people into treatment and one of the programs our teams are doing out there in the Hamlin County area is signing people up for Medicaid to try to get them into that treatment.”

Their overwhelming message to me was that we must preserve Medicaid and work to improve the critical health services the program offers, because it is literally saving people’s lives every day.

And so today – I appreciate each of you being here and I look forward to hearing about how we can work to improve our nation’s Medicaid program to better serve the families enrolled and to continue our efforts to combat opioid abuse.

I have no doubts that improvements can be made and I look forward to hearing all your suggestions, but I want to end by stressing we must do so in a way that does not jeopardize care for those that need it.