

Opening Statement of Senator Jeanne Shaheen

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

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As we all appreciate, the abuse of prescription opioids, heroin, and fentanyl is the most urgent public health challenge facing our state – and it is also the most urgent law enforcement challenge facing our state.

The sheer pervasiveness of the epidemic is shocking: In New Hampshire, three times more people are dying from drug overdoses than from traffic accidents, discarded needles are being left in parks where children play, teenagers are getting addicted not to cigarettes but to heroin and prescription opioids.

I was recently briefed on the crisis by Mike Ferguson, the DEA Special Agent in Charge for New England, and John DeLena, who heads DEA's Manchester District Office. They told me about a recent incident: agents stopped a car and found a mother, father, grandmother, and small child. The adults had just made a purchase of heroin and were heading back to Maine.

We know that we cannot arrest and jail our way out of this drug crisis. Law enforcement leaders are outspoken in telling us that the answer is prevention, treatment, and recovery.

To paraphrase from another context: It's going to take an entire village to defeat the heroin epidemic. Individuals can't do it alone. Families can't do it alone. Law enforcement can't do it alone. Public health can't do it alone. This is an all-hands-on-deck moment. It's about mobilizing entire communities and all their resources – because this is literally an issue of life or death.

Addiction is a chronic illness with no permanent cure. People don't find lasting recovery in a clinic; they find lasting recovery in their community. They need social supports, and they need to connect with a positive, healthy, caring community. This is the only way to sustain sobriety over a lifetime.

The good news is that we have a more enlightened approach to the surge in opioid abuse. We're learning. The response to the crack cocaine epidemic in the 80s and 90s was a sledgehammer, law-enforcement approach: arrests, convictions, and mandatory sentences.

Today, we know that the answer is education, not incarceration. The answer is prevention, not punishment. The answer is treatment, recovery, and rehabilitation, not sweeping the problem under the rug by throwing addicts in jail.

Another big part of the solution is drug courts for non-violent offenders with addiction or mental health issues. But there's a problem: Drug courts only work if there are treatment programs available for those who are referred by the court. Because of lack of funding,

thousands of Granite Staters are being denied treatment and recovery. Many are dying. Many are returning to criminal acts to pay for their next fix.

The Senate's HHS appropriations subcommittee voted to cut funding for substance abuse treatment under SAMSHA by nearly \$130 million. That includes a \$50 million cut to the Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment block grant, which is so important to NH. In the subcommittee, I strongly opposed that cut.

Cutting funding is wrong on two counts. One, cutting funding for prevention and treatment is a classic case of penny-wise-pound-foolish budgeting. We will end up paying far more for incarceration and crime – not to mention the countless lives that will be lost and families that will be shattered.

And two, as I said earlier, we are confronting a profoundly destructive crisis. Heroin and opioid addiction are ravaging our state. The New Hampshire way is that when there is a crisis, we come together- we put partisanship and ideology aside - we work together on practical, pragmatic solutions. That will be the focus of today's hearing.

I thank our witnesses for traveling to Manchester, today, and I look forward to their testimony. I'm especially grateful that Doug Griffin can be with us today. Since his daughter, Courtney, lost her life to heroin last fall, Doug has been courageous and outspoken in sharing her tragic story and helping to lead the fight against heroin in the Granite State.