

Opening Statement
Chair Diana DeGette
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Oversight of Federal Efforts to Combat the Spread of Illicit Fentanyl”
July 16, 2019

Today, we are once again here to discuss the opioid crisis, an epidemic that this country has been battling for years.

Previously, this Committee has taken numerous actions to investigate the origins and elements of the crisis and help bring relief to those who are suffering.

Today’s hearing will examine the growing threat of synthetic opioids, which experts have called the “third wave” of the opioid epidemic.

Our communities have already been ravaged by prescription opioids and then heroin. Now, unfortunately, we are seeing significant increases in overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids like fentanyl, including in my home state of Colorado.

Fentanyl is extremely dangerous. It’s 50 times more powerful than heroin, 100 times more powerful than morphine, and it’s responsible for a number of growing overdose deaths in America.

Fentanyl is also cheap and it’s easy to produce, giving a high return for those who seek to profit from the destruction that it causes. Fentanyl can be used on its own or can be mixed with other drugs. Alarmingly, even amateur chemists can produce this highly dangerous drug with minimal resources and experience.

It is often made overseas, likely in China, then shipped either directly to users in the United States or through intermediaries in other countries like Mexico.

It can be bought anonymously on the Dark Web, and because it is so potent, small but deadly quantities of the drug can be shipped in packages via the U.S. Mail or in private consignment carriers.

Today, we have before us six agencies who play important roles in fighting the proliferation of fentanyl. Each is responsible for a piece of this effort – from guarding the border, to taking down drug trafficking organizations, to protecting the legitimate drug supply.

These agencies will provide us with their assessment of how we got here, where the fentanyl threat stands right now, and how it has changed in recent months. And I want to thank each one of our witnesses for coming today.

The purpose is to examine the state of fentanyl, but also our government's response to it. The threat is serious and evolving, and our response must be equally committed and adaptable. These agencies have experience enforcing our nation's drug laws, gathering intelligence against traffickers, and arresting powerful criminals. And we are thankful for their efforts. But fentanyl represents a unique problem, so these agencies need to develop new ways of attacking it.

Because we have seen the opioid crisis evolve and take different forms, we also need to anticipate how fentanyl trends are likely to continue to change. I am interested to hear all of our witnesses' perspectives on this and how we can get ahead of this evolving threat, so we are not caught flat-footed, like we have been before, unfortunately.

I'm struck by the diverse missions of this panel. It is not every day that we have a hearing with the U.S. Postal Service and the DEA on the same panel.

Every one of these witnesses represents just a piece of this puzzle, which means we cannot succeed unless everyone comes together. This crisis is going to require a massive, coordinated effort to overcome.

We frankly need a national strategy on fentanyl response. And I don't just mean a white paper document or a task force report. I mean we need a coherent, practical plan for how we are going to beat this problem.

For example, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) is supposed to formulate a strategy, bring all of the agencies together, and see to it that the strategy is implemented effectively. Are you coordinating the efforts of these agencies, and if so, how? Your mission is now more important than ever, so we will be looking to you for leadership and vision.

DEA, you are on the front lines and often develop important leads for targeting drugs. Is that information being regularly shared with CBP so it can adequately target fentanyl shipments when they come into the U.S.?

FDA, suddenly, you are in the middle of this fight because fentanyl is increasingly being mixed with other drugs, including counterfeit prescription drugs. How are you coordinating with law enforcement to protect the drug supply?

These are just a few of the questions we will explore today. If we are going to solve this problem, we need better cooperation across agencies, and we need to think differently than we have on past drug epidemics.

Finally, this hearing is just one piece of oversight. This Subcommittee will stay on this issue and ensure progress is being made so that we are not back here again next year talking about the same problems.

I thank the witnesses for their service on this critical issue, and for coming here today, all on one panel.