

Opening Statement
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on “Oversight of Federal Efforts to Combat the Spread of Illicit Fentanyl:”
July 16, 2019

This Committee has held many hearings on the opioid crisis over the last several years, and with each hearing it seems the challenge to combat the crisis grows even more daunting.

While opioid prescribing rates appear to have gone down, overdose deaths continue to climb. Communities all around the country are still suffering from this epidemic, now largely at the hands of heroin and increasingly, fentanyl.

Fentanyl is a deadly synthetic drug that is 50 times more powerful than heroin. Because it is relatively easy to make and so potent, it is tragically leading to large increases in overdose deaths.

We have all heard the terrible numbers that tell this story. In 2017, there were over 47,000 opioid overdose deaths. 28,000 of those deaths involved synthetic opioids such as fentanyl. My home state of New Jersey, for example, has seen a tenfold increase in deaths involving fentanyl in the last several years.

Fentanyl represents the third “wave” in the opioid crisis. After the country was inundated with prescription opioids, prescribing rates went down – but many of those who were already addicted then turned to heroin.

Now the trend is shifting toward synthetic opioids like fentanyl, which poses a unique threat. These drugs are manufactured overseas in countries like China, oftentimes in clandestine labs. These drugs are then shipped into the United States, often in small quantities that are difficult to detect.

To make matters worse, we are now seeing fentanyl increasingly mixed into other drugs like cocaine, methamphetamine, and even counterfeit prescription drugs like oxycodone. This means that many unsuspecting people are dying at the hands of fentanyl when they didn’t even realize they were taking it.

This drug represents an unprecedented threat to the United States – and we must do everything we can to stop its flow into our communities.

Today we will hear from the key law enforcement and regulatory agencies on the front lines of this battle. Each agency plays a critical part and has decades of experience in this fight. The problem, however, is that fentanyl is unlike any drug crisis we have faced before.

All of these factors point to one conclusion – we have to think differently about how to counter the spread of fentanyl. The old approaches simply will not suffice.

Finally, we have repeatedly heard from experts that we cannot arrest our way out of the opioid crisis, and fentanyl is no different. Evidence-based treatment is the best hope for those suffering from addiction, and we must support programs that provide that help.

Today's hearing focuses on how to stop the flow of fentanyl, but this is by no means the end of the conversation. I am committed to providing Americans suffering from opioid use disorder access to the quality treatment they need. This Committee will continue to shine a spotlight on this crisis to help identify solutions, including in the treatment and public health arenas.

I yield back.