



COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY & COMMERCE
DEMOCRATS
RANKING MEMBER FRANK PALLONE, JR.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 20, 2018

CONTACT

[CJ Young](#) – (202) 225-5735

Pallone Opening Remarks at Hearing with DEA on Combating the Opioid Epidemic

Washington, DC – *Energy and Commerce Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks today at a Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing on “The Drug Enforcement Administration’s Role in Combating the Opioid Epidemic:”*

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The opioid epidemic continues to devastate communities and families in every part of America. Every day, 115 Americans lose their lives to an opioid overdose.

We must do more to help those struggling with addiction, and I am committed to working with my colleagues to advance meaningful legislation and resources to help combat this crisis. Families all across this nation are looking to us for help, and it is my hope that DEA will work cooperatively with us on this effort.

In addition to advancing efforts to respond to this crisis, Congress also has a responsibility to figure out what went wrong, how it went wrong, and how to make sure something like this never happens again. That is why this Committee has been engaged in a bipartisan investigation into the role both DEA and drug distributors have in addressing the ongoing opioid crisis, and what systems failed to protect the communities that have been so overwhelmed by this epidemic.

I hope that the lessons we learn will help us address this urgent problem throughout the country, from New Jersey to West Virginia and beyond.

Clearly, something went wrong. The safeguards designed to prevent opioids from being diverted into the wrong hands simply did not work.

Our Committee’s investigation has found that drug distributors shipped millions of pills to multiple small-town pharmacies in West Virginia every year. For example, a pharmacy in a

town of 2-thousand people received 16.5 million doses of opioids over a 10-year period. And there were other pharmacies in that area.

There is simply no way that there was an actual medical need for this incredible volume of opioids in this rural, sparsely populated area. I would hope that DEA can tell us what broke down in the safeguards that should have protected communities from these abusive practices. These include failures by both the distributors and DEA.

For example, I have questions about the data that DEA collects, and why they did not use it more aggressively to prevent the oversupply of opioids in certain cases. We know that distributors are required to tell DEA how many pills they ship each month, and where those pills go. It is not clear, however, how DEA has used this data in the past, and if DEA is using this data now to help it curtail excessive pill distribution.

Distributors are also required to alert DEA when a pharmacy places an order for what appears to be a suspiciously large quantity of pills. It appears that distributors have not always alerted DEA of these suspicious orders, and may not even have had adequate systems in place to identify inappropriately large orders. But at the same time, it is also not clear that DEA has always done enough with the suspicious orders they receive from distributors to alert the agency to possibly anomalous shipments. I hope we can get answers to both of these questions.

And when multiple distributors ship to a single pharmacy, possibly causing an oversupply, it is not clear that DEA has had an adequate system to identify and flag to the distributors that an oversupply problem may be unfolding. Unlike DEA who has access to comprehensive distribution data, distributors can only see what they supply to an individual pharmacy. Yet, if DEA is not flagging when multiple distributors are at risk of collectively oversupplying a pharmacy, then the result is another example of a system failure that can lead to diversion.

It seems likely that failing to report suspicious orders by distributors has hurt DEA's ability to monitor the distribution of controlled substances. I hope that we will hear that this is no longer an issue today, and if it is I'd like to know what tools DEA needs to help it enforce this requirement. But at the same time, I do hope that DEA is making full use of suspicious orders when they are reported to their field offices.

Finally, while our investigation has focused on what went wrong in West Virginia, I also want to know how DEA is monitoring distributors across the country now. Addictive drugs are still abundant in our communities, and now new opioids are also being introduced to the market.

I hope that DEA is acting proactively to analyze shipments of these pills and, where appropriate, stepping in and stopping the over-distribution of these drugs.

I want to thank Administrator Patterson for appearing before us today. This issue is extraordinarily important, and no entity can address it alone. DEA and Congress must be

allies in combatting the opioid crisis, and only by understanding what went wrong can we fix this system for the future.

Thank you.

###

democrats-energycommerce.house.gov | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [YouTube](#) | [Flickr](#)