

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “An Epidemic within a Pandemic: Understanding Substance Use and Misuse in America”

April 14, 2021

This Committee has a long history of working on a bipartisan basis to combat the threat of opioids and substance use and misuse. Together, we were making significant progress, but unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic downturn over the last year has weighed heavily on the American people and has only exacerbated substance use and misuse. Today, we are continuing our work to address the epidemic within the pandemic.

The statistics are alarming. In 2019 – prior to the pandemic – more than 20 million Americans experienced a substance use disorder, and half of those involved opioids. Tragically, there were nearly 71,000 drug overdose deaths.

Recent data shows that the pandemic has accelerated overdose deaths. From August 2019 to August 2020, 88,000 overdose deaths were reported, the highest ever recorded in a 12-month period. The primary driver of these deaths was a dramatic increase in the availability of synthetic opioids derived from fentanyl. These low-cost substances can be 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine and are frequently mixed into other drugs like cocaine and methamphetamine.

To combat the opioid epidemic, the Committee advanced major pieces of legislation that became law, including the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, the 21st Century Cures Act, and the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act. These laws expanded critical substance use disorder services and supports for communities across the nation. But our efforts have not ended there.

And since the beginning of the pandemic, we pushed for the inclusion of funding aimed at the dual public health threats of the virus and rising rates of overdose deaths, substance use and misuse, anxiety, and depression. I look forward to hearing from our panelists about the implementation of these laws, how the pandemic is impacting people suffering from substance use and misuse, and what more can be done to help aid in response to these threats.

On our first panel, we will hear from the Acting Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), who recently released the Biden Administration’s first-year drug policy priorities. I commend the Administration for taking an evidence-based, public health approach to the drug epidemic. I also applaud them for their plans to expand evidence-based treatment, reduce youth substance use, enhance recovery services, and advance racial equity. Their work falls squarely within the jurisdiction of this subcommittee. I look forward to hearing more from ONDCP about how we can work together to eradicate the threat of illicit fentanyl-derived substances.

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Our second panel is composed of experienced providers, public health experts, advocates for justice, and federal law enforcement professionals. This group is on the frontlines of the opioid epidemic and their insight on the impact of federal policy is invaluable to our work here. I thank all the witnesses for their selfless dedication to this cause.

Throughout our discussion, it is important to remember that substance use disorder is a complex, but treatable disease. Regardless of a patient's personal history or health care coverage, they deserve compassion and help just like any other patient with a diagnosable disease. We must approach the substance use epidemic as a public health crisis and take the lead on destigmatizing effective treatments.

The 11 pieces of legislation we are considering today tackle the epidemic in multiple ways and many of them take a public health approach. This includes proposals to address the need for first responder training and prescriber education, to dismantle barriers to treatment, and to bolster public health and recovery programs in the states.

We have considered some of these policies before and they remain a critical component of a comprehensive response to the crisis. Other policies are a result of the emerging data and rising threat of illicit fentanyl.

We must continue to work in a bipartisan fashion to combat this epidemic as millions of lives depend on it. I commend the sponsors of these bills for their leadership and look forward to our continued work in addressing this devastating epidemic in the months ahead.

Thank you, I yield the remainder of my time.