

Opening Statement of the Honorable Tim Murphy
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on “Fentanyl: The Next Wave of the Opioid Crisis”
March 21, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

America is in a full-on opioid crisis. About two decades ago, it started with the overprescribing of opioid drugs and then shifted more to heroin. Today the Subcommittee examines the next wave of the opioid crisis, an even more dangerous threat on our streets – fentanyl.

The surge of fentanyl is having a dramatic and deadly effect on our communities. We all see the headlines—these are our neighbors, our families, our friends. We need an “all hands on deck approach” to fight this problem, which will involve not just the federal government, but states, localities, and even international partners.

Fentanyl is made in a lab. For many years, it has been a powerful pain medicine used by patients with cancer or for those with extreme pain. It is about 50 times more potent than heroin and 100 times more potent than morphine.

Now illicit fentanyl has become the MSG of narcotics, a potent additive to heroin, cocaine, or even counterfeit prescription drugs. This is the way the drug dealers increase profits, stretch out their supply, and expand the number of addicts by juicing the potency of heroin or other street drugs. Users often don’t even know that fentanyl is in the drugs they are buying.

The fentanyl crisis is exceptionally dangerous because of its high potency and the speed with which it reaches the brain. Just two milligrams of fentanyl can kill, whether swallowed, inhaled, or absorbed through skin. To appreciate how small an amount two milligrams is, a sweetener packet at a restaurant table contains 1,000 milligrams.

Those suffering from an overdose involving fentanyl may require both higher doses and multiple administrations of naloxone to reverse the overdose and to become stabilized. Even the police and first responders are at risk from inadvertently touching or inhaling fentanyl powder at a crime scene or helping an overdose victim.

An added challenge is that there are many chemical variations of fentanyl – commonly referred to as analogues. There are about 30 known analogues, however only 19 of these analogues are controlled substances under federal law.

Since 2013, fentanyl overdoses and deaths have surged with no end in sight. Fentanyl and its analogues have contributed to at least 5,000 overdose deaths in the United States, including the death of music star Prince last year. In my district alone, fentanyl-related deaths have exploded since 2014. Last year, 86 people in Westmoreland County died from drug overdoses linked at least in part to fentanyl. Even these statistics seriously undercount the fentanyl threat nationally because most states and localities are not testing or tracking fentanyl in drug overdose cases. At this rate, the capacity of law enforcement and the healthcare system will be overwhelmed.

China is the primary source of fentanyl. There are thousands of labs making illicit pure fentanyl as well as the source of ingredients or precursors needed to manufacture fentanyl. Traffickers ship these ingredients to secret labs in Mexico run by drug cartels and then smuggle pounds of fentanyl over the southwest border into the U.S. Chinese labs are also a primary source for pure fentanyl ordered on the open Internet and on the dark web and delivered through the mail or air express carriers. Finally, China is the main source of pill presses that can make thousands of pills an hour to support fentanyl press mill operations.

The fentanyl problem is spreading and going to get worse because the money and profit is enormous. According to data from the DEA, a kilogram of heroin can be purchased for roughly \$6,000 and sold wholesale for \$80,000. However, a kilogram of pure fentanyl can be purchased for less than \$5,000 and is so potent that it can be stretched into 16 to 24 kilograms of product when using cutting agents such as talcum powder or caffeine. Each kilogram of cut fentanyl can be sold wholesale for \$80,000, resulting in a total profit in the neighborhood of \$1.6 million. That is about 20 times more profit than heroin.

We need a federal strategy dedicated to combatting fentanyl as the clear and present danger it presents to our national security and public health.

We welcome our panel of witnesses today. We salute you for your work, thank you for appearing today, and look forward to working together to stop the spread of this epidemic.