

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Chair Diana DeGette

Oversight of Federal Efforts to Combat the Spread of Illicit Fentanyl

July 16, 2019

Today, we are here once again to discuss the opioid crisis, an epidemic 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, we are seeing significant increases in overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, including in my home state of Colorado.

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

Fentanyl is also cheap and easy to produce, giving a high return for those who seek to profit from the destruction 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 expertise.

It is often made overseas, likely in China, then shipped either directly to users in the United States or through intermediaries in other countries such as 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 private consignment carriers.

Today, we have before us six agencies who play important roles in fighting the proliferation of fentanyl. Each of them 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 now, and how it has changed in recent months.

The purpose of today's hearing 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 these witnesses' perspectives on how we can get ahead of this evolving threat, so we are not caught flat-footed.

As I look at the witness panel, I am struck by their diverse missions. It is not every day that we have a hearing with the U.S. Postal Service and the DEA on the same witness panel.

Each of you represents only a piece of this puzzle, which means we cannot succeed unless all of you come together. This crisis is going to require a massive, coordinated effort to overcome.

We need a national strategy on our 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 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, you are suddenly 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 our 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 being here today.