

Questions for the Record
“President Biden’s Border Crisis is a Public Health Crisis”

The Honorable Dan Crenshaw

Between the COVID pandemic and the fentanyl surge, the Chinese Communist Party is culpable for the spread of two public health emergencies in a row. But unlike how we stemmed the tide of COVID, the fentanyl epidemic is not receiving the attention it needs. This is particularly true for communities in my district, like Harris County, where fentanyl and fentanyl derivatives kill at least one person every day. Altogether, fentanyl kills more young Americans than COVID, and is now the leading cause of death for the 18-45 age group. This is no accident, and it's a direct reflection of the related mental health crisis that is afflicting our next generation.

- 1. As a behavioral health provider, how has the surge in illicit fentanyl challenged your efforts to serve the younger population?**

The rate at which our young adult population are experiencing mental health issues has increased at an alarming rate since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and many times untreated mental illness leads to illicit drug use. The rise of fentanyl and fentanyl analog use among youth and young adults is especially alarming because often individuals believe they are taking one substance, such as non-prescribed Adderall or cocaine, when in fact, the drug contains fentanyl. This increase in fentanyl-related addiction is placing a tremendous strain on our community's resources. Not only is this strain impacting our behavioral health and addiction specialists, who describe fentanyl treatment as being far more difficult due to its highly addictive nature and potency, but it is having an impact on our law enforcement as well, as they are required to act as health care professionals. Our communities need more behavioral healthcare workers to address this crisis.

- 2. This public health crisis also disproportionately impacts our servicemembers. Nearly 1 in 7 soldiers have self-reported opioid usage (including previously prescribed), predisposing them to opioid misuse, including with dangerous fentanyl derivatives.[1] How has your care network addressed this disturbing trend, and what message do you have for the Department of Defense and VA when it comes to confronting this issue on the front end?**

Our nation has a duty to care for those who served. This duty requires a multifaceted approach, with care from our government agencies like the VA, but also community members like Oceans Healthcare. Oceans Healthcare takes pride in serving our servicemembers by offering our specialized support services such as the STAR program, which provides specialized care and treatment for active-duty military,

veterans, and their families. Active-duty military members and our veterans may have a unique set of mental health challenges. Factors like combat-related post-traumatic stress, and long separation from friends and family can contribute to anxiety and depression. Our physician-led treatment teams provide evidence-base psychotherapies, including clinical practice guidelines recommended by the U.S. Department of Defense and Veteran's Affairs. We must continue to find ways to collaborate with our government agencies, as the demand for behavioral healthcare for our servicemembers is too high for the VA and DoD to handle on their own. Furthermore, the DoD and the VA must find ways to reduce the bureaucratic hurdles of paperwork to be more efficient with their resources and increase access to care. Our government must prioritize patients over paperwork.

- 3. The border crisis is also placing great stress on our healthcare providers. According to recent reports, the surge of migrants coming across the southern border is severely straining hospitals and healthcare workers in some areas. Yuma Regional Medical Center in Arizona has been forced to delay care for certain patients and El Paso, TX declared a state of emergency and had to rely on hospitals to house these migrants since their shelters were over capacity. How is the surge of migrants impacting local healthcare infrastructure? Do these communities have the necessary amount of healthcare workers to keep up with the demand?**

No, these communities do not have the necessary amount of healthcare workers to keep up with demand. While this issue of staffing is certainly greater in border communities, I can also say this is consistent across the state, and frankly country. I think something to consider is the compensation and motivation for health providers to move to a border town, which is often in a rural setting, away from major urban cities. It is very difficult to find staff willing to provide care in these communities. Additionally, many border facilities compete with local hospitals and health providers, instead of looking for ways to partner. This makes it even more difficult for local hospitals and care centers to remain staffed.

The Honorable Rick Allen

- 1. Can you speak to how staff from behavioral health facilities in Texas are being directed to care for the influx of individuals in migrant camps has impacted health systems across the state and their ability to provide care in communities?**

While our staff cannot be specifically directed to relocate, if someone presents at our facility, we must provide care under EMTALA. The larger issue, however, is the shortage of healthcare workers across the state of Texas. This shortage is especially acute for behavioral health providers, which is exacerbated when comparing rural and underserved areas (including many border communities) to urban areas. Lack of parity remains one of the largest barriers for behavioral health facilities in recruiting new healthcare workers

when compared to other medical specialties. If a healthcare professional could work in an urban community in another specialty with greater compensation, why wouldn't they? Furthermore, it is often challenging when additional layers of competition are added due to an increased need for healthcare staff in migrant camps. In these instances, it's critical for hospitals to look for ways to partner with migrant camps and border facilities in order to ensure the most efficient use of staffing resources, instead of competing against one another.