

**Testimony of Congressman Hakeem Jeffries on H.R. 449 the “Synthetic Drug Awareness Act of 2017” before the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health
“Member Day: Testimony and Proposals on the Opioid Crisis.”
October 11, 2017**

Let me first thank the leadership of the Energy and Commerce Committee, Chairman Walden and Ranking Member Pallone, and of the Subcommittee on Health, Chairman Burgess and Ranking Member Green, as well as the distinguished Members of the Energy and Commerce Committee for holding this hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the “Synthetic Drug Awareness Act of 2017”—H.R. 449.

The opioid crisis has ravaged families across the country without regard to zip code, income, race religion or gender. Like a malignant tumor, the opioid crisis is eating away at young people in urban, rural and suburban America. One reason opioid abuse has become so prevalent, and so deadly, is the emergence of the synthetic drug called fentanyl—a substance that can be 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine.

In order to address the multifaceted public health crisis, we must consider both the cause and effect. H.R. 449 addresses a critical and sometimes overlooked threat, the use of synthetic drugs by teenagers. It requires the Surgeon General to prepare a comprehensive report on the public health effects of synthetic drug use by 12 to 18 year olds in America. With the information this study will provide, Congress can work to prevent substance abuse by younger Americans through an enhanced and enlightened lens.

Nationwide, the drug overdose death rate has more than doubled during the past decade among younger Americans.¹ Many experts believe this troubling phenomenon results from the

¹ U.S. News, “Drug Overdose Rates Soaring Among U.S. Youth,” November 2015, *available at* <https://health.usnews.com/health-news/articles/2015/11/19/drug-overdose-rates-soaring-among-us-youth>.

rise and availability of potent and dangerous substances like illicit fentanyl and other synthetic drugs.²

Teenage fentanyl use is a vicious cycle: adolescents have a still-developing prefrontal cortex, which can facilitate drug-seeking behavior. The drug then alters the development of this area of the brain, making that behavior permanent. In fact, more than 90 percent of adults who develop a substance abuse disorder begin using before they are 18 years old.

In New York City, overdoses kill more people each year than murders, suicides and car crashes combined. Between 2015 and 2016, city officials saw a huge jump in overdose-related deaths, with more than eight in ten involving an opioid, a trend driven by fentanyl.³

This bill has significant support among Republicans and Democrats and has been incorporated into the legislative agenda for the Bipartisan Heroin Task Force. Furthermore, a number of health and patient advocacy groups are supportive of this bill, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Association of Nurse Practitioners, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychological Association, College on Problems of Drug Dependence, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, Friends of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Healthy Teen Network, Mental Health America, National Association of County and City Health Officials and National Association of Police Organizations.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I respectfully request Committee consideration of the “Synthetic Drug Awareness Act” at the earliest possible time.

² The New York Times, “Drug Deaths in America Are Rising Faster than Ever,” June 2017, *available at* <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/05/upshot/opioid-epidemic-drug-overdose-deaths-are-rising-faster-than-ever.html?smid=tw-upshotnyt&smtyp=cur&r=1>.

³ New York City Health Department, “Epi Data Brief,” June 2017, *available at* <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/epi/databrief89.pdf>.