

Opening Statement  
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
Subcommittee on Health  
Hearing on “Combating an Epidemic: Legislation to Help Patients with Substance Use  
Disorders”  
March 3, 2020

Today, the Subcommittee will continue its bipartisan work to combat an ongoing and devastating epidemic involving opioids and substance use.

We all know the statistics. In 2018, over 67,000 Americans died from a drug overdose – well over half of these deaths involved opioids. And there are approximately 20 million Americans living with a substance use disorder – while only a fraction are receiving treatment.

This Committee has taken action to reverse this trend. We advanced major pieces of legislation through the Committee in recent years – including the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, the 21st Century Cures Act, and the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act. These were important legislative achievements that invested in critical treatment. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about the implementation of these laws, and what gaps remain to be addressed.

Nationwide, opioid prescribing rates and overdose deaths are decreasing, but our work in fighting this epidemic is far from done. There are still a lot of people and communities struggling and we must continue to do more. We must also address the emergence of synthetic opioids like illicit fentanyl and the rise in deaths attributed to stimulants like cocaine and methamphetamine.

Our first panel of witnesses includes officials from both the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). I look forward to hearing more about the progress the Administration has made in implementing the SUPPORT Act. Among some of the key provisions of this law, HHS was charged with providing grant support and guidance to states and other stakeholders, while DEA was charged with issuing telemedicine regulations aimed at helping more patients in areas with doctor shortages. I hope to drill down on these provisions and many others. I am concerned that the Administration may be falling behind on some of the deadlines in the SUPPORT Act, and I want to understand why this is happening.

Our second panel of witnesses includes experts on the ground of this epidemic – all of which are working to turn the tide for Americans across this country. I look forward to hearing testimony about the impact that recent federal funding and policy changes are having, and what more we can do. I thank all of our witnesses for their ongoing dedication to the communities they serve.

As I said when all the prior substance use packages passed out of this Committee – we have made progress, but our work is far from complete. So today, we will be considering 14 pieces of

legislation aimed at providing more help and more resources to those still struggling across the country. Some of these policies were Democratic priorities that were not included in the SUPPORT Act, but that we continue to feel are critical to effectively responding to this national epidemic. Others are new ideas to address new and emerging problems that my colleagues on both sides of the aisle have identified.

The unique jurisdiction of this Subcommittee spans the work of both HHS and DEA, which allows us to approach this problem from multiple angles. That said, it is critical that we look at substance use disorder as a complex but treatable disease of the brain. Whether an individual has a substance use disorder in a hospital or within a criminal justice setting – they are a patient. We must address this epidemic as the true public health crisis it is.

Many of the bipartisan bills we will be discussing today take this public health approach. This includes proposals to address the need for more addiction medicine providers, to dismantle barriers to treatment, and to bolster public health and recovery programs in the states.

I thank all my colleagues for your continued dedication to combating this devastating epidemic.

Thank you, I yield the remainder of my time.