

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Representative Paul Tonko**

Health Subcommittee Hearing on “Addressing the Opioid Crisis: Examining the SUPPORT Act Five Years Later.”

June 9, 2023

Thank you to everyone for joining here for this important topic and thank you to Chair Guthrie for holding this vital hearing. As a Co-Chair of the bipartisan Addiction, Treatment and Recovery Caucus, I am all too familiar with the devastating impact of the disease of addiction.

This is a loss many of us know too well. The loss of a daughter, son, father, mother, sister or brother. A neighbor dying much too young and leaving behind a grieving family. Communities are being ripped apart by poisons seemingly beyond our control.

Last year in our nation there was an estimated 109,680 overdose deaths.

That’s one hundred and nine thousand, six hundred and eighty lives lost.

Think of how many people that is every single day needlessly dying and having their lives cut short.

Think of the magnitude of all of those impacted by those 109,680 loved ones.

For each of those individuals, there is a whole universe of friends, family and communities impacted.

I recognize that many of our brave witnesses today were brought here by tragedy and terrible pain.

I hope that as a committee and as colleagues and friends, we can learn from their pain and act together with urgency.

This year with the reauthorization of the SUPPORT Act, we have an opportunity to address the devastating disease of addiction. I think we can all agree there is a crisis at hand.

Sadly, in 2021, 94 percent of people aged 12 or older with a substance use disorder did not receive any treatment.

It’s a startling statistic, but one that makes it clear there is a massive gap in access to treatment.

Over the last decade, I’ve recognized this gap and focused my advocacy in Congress on knocking out every single barrier to addiction treatment so that when an individual struggling with the disease of addiction reaches out for help, we have a medical system ready to welcome them with open arms.

As a committee I ask that we work together to make access to affordable and quality addiction treatment our highest priority.

I am heartened that, as I look across at the Members here, I see a coalition that understands the importance of that goal. In this moment, I feel hopeful that together we can find common ground and take action.

During my time in Congress we worked together to pass CARA, the SUPPORT Act, and most recently, our bipartisan mental health package. These policies have provided billions of dollars to support the American people and combat the overdose crisis.

In particular we had a lot of bipartisan success when we worked to pass the SUPPORT Act into law back in 2018.

Together we made progress forward in access to and coverage for Medications for Opioid Use Disorder. We expanded the providers who can prescribe MAT and we also created an innovative new demonstration program for reentry that has now been put into action. But we still have more work to do to protect the most vulnerable.

Five years later, it's clear that there is widespread support for good reentry policy. I humbly ask, let's come together and pass the bipartisan Reentry Act, which would be a game changer for reducing overdose deaths and suicides by allowing all states to provide pre-release care to Medicaid eligible individuals up to 30 days prior to release from incarceration.

I also hope we can have a comprehensive discussion on how to expand access to treatment including Medications for Opioid Use Disorder such as buprenorphine and methadone. We also should expand access to naloxone, testing strips and syringe services so that lives can be saved.

I look forward to discussions over the coming months on how we can support policies to save lives. Addressing the disease of addiction must include a compassionate response bolstered by the pillars of prevention, treatment, and recovery.

I also want to thank everyone for being willing to discuss addiction. For far too long, the disease of addiction has carried an awful stigma. Together by gathering here to openly discuss this, we help share that addiction is not a moral failure but a disease. We can share how recovery is not easy and often not a linear path, but that a life in recovery can be filled with so much hope.

We also make it clear that we will not turn our backs on those who are suffering from addiction. We recognize their pain and the barriers that make treatment and recovery difficult.

However, when someone has that moment of clarity and seeks treatment, we should have systems in place that move heaven and earth to get people the very best treatment available.

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I look forward to learning more from our witnesses here today and I promise you that I will continue my fight to ensure treatment on demand so that all those who are suffering from this disease of despair have access to treatment and hope.