

Testimony of Raymond Cullen
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Health Hearing
“Combatting Existing and Emerging Illicit Drug Threats”
February 6, 2025

Thank you Chairs Guthrie and Carter and Ranking members Pallone and DeGette for having me here today, to speak at this hearing entitled “Combatting Existing and Emerging Illicit Drug Threats” which, based on the events transpiring this week, is very timely.

I’d also like to thank Congressman Joyce for his support these past couple of years.

I am here today to discuss the fentanyl epidemic which has been targeting the young people of our country and to discuss some things that we would like to see done (some of which have happened this week) so that other parents do not receive a visit from the police informing them that their child is dead.

That is what we experienced just under 2 ½ years ago. The State police knocked on our door and informed me that our son Zachary was dead, presumably from an overdose. He was the youngest of our three boys and he died just nine days after his 23rd birthday.

Zachary was a wonderful young man who was in college studying business, had been working for Papa Johns delivering pizzas for four years and was also developing a technology company on the block chain platform. That was his dream and passion.

His other love was basketball, especially playing a game of pickup in the driveway with me and his brothers. His last year at school, his intramural team won the championship. He was so excited.

But even more impressive was his kind and compassionate heart. Zachary helped numerous people during his short 23 years. Zach's last summer at the beach, he saved his friend who was caught in a rip current and on the verge of drowning. Another time one of his co-workers mentioned that he was behind on rent and was afraid he was going to be evicted. Having just received money from his grandfather at Christmas, Zachary found out how much money was needed, anonymously placed cash in an envelope and slipped it into his co-workers' car. That was our son. He loved his family, he loved his friends and he loved life!

Zachary did not suffer from substance use disorder; he was not an addict. However, following his death we did learn that he had used cocaine, on occasion, at college. We were told that cocaine is a commonly used recreational drug on campus and at Greek life parties. However, Zachary did not die at school. He and a couple of friends went to Harrisburg to celebrate a birthday. We were told by the detective that they were not in a bad section of the city nor were they seeking out drugs. They were downtown at a few restaurants and bars eating, drinking and having fun. The detective also told us that he believes the boys were targeted by a dealer. Why, we do not know. But they made the decision to purchase some coke. That was a poor decision, but not one that should have killed our son. Someone intentionally laced that cocaine with fentanyl. Our son did not accidentally overdose, he was poisoned, there is a difference. Actually, we feel he was murdered.

We beg of you to get the word out about illicit fentanyl to EVERYONE. This is URGENT and must be done immediately because we need to slow down the rate at which other families are losing their loved ones. We feel this crisis should be attacked with the same vigor and intensity that Covid was.

People need to know the statistics. More than 110,000 died from overdoses in 2024 and of those, the majority involved illicit fentanyl. It takes only 2 mg of fentanyl to kill, about the size of 10-15 grains of salt. One packet of Sweet-N-Low, if filled with fentanyl, is enough to kill 500 people. Let me repeat that, a Sweet-N-Low packet filled with fentanyl can kill 500 people. Based on those metrics, the 43 pounds of fentanyl seized coming from Canada in 2024, would be enough to kill just under 10 million people!

Parents need to know that these drugs are not just the ones being bought on the streets through dealers or from their child's friend or acquaintance, but also through social media platforms, such as SnapChat. Most kids are not addicts. They are stressed out, depressed and anxious kids looking for something to help calm them down, to help them sleep, or to help them focus so they can study. They have no idea that 70% of all drugs bought either from a dealer, a friend or online are laced with enough fentanyl to kill them. It is a real-life game of Russian roulette and most of them don't even know that they are playing.

While we understand that there have been some efforts to combat this scourge, we find it difficult to understand why it took so long and why combatting it would be so controversial or political.

Some have said that there is a stigma attached to those “overdosing” on fentanyl – that they are just drug addicts who will eventually die of an overdose of something or sometime.

While Zach did not suffer from substance use disorder, the lives lost of those who were, are just as valuable to their parents and loved ones as Zach is to us.

“So what do you want us to do?” is a question we have heard from members of Congress before. Our answers are, and have been:

Education and Awareness

- PSA’s
 - Parent focused on ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX
 - Young-Adult focused on SnapChat, TikTok, Instagram
- Make fentanyl awareness part of High School assemblies and College freshman orientation
- Distinguish between poisoning versus overdose

Treatment

- Funding for treatment and rehabilitation facilities for those already entangled in SUD

I’d like to, once again, thank this body for taking on such a crucial topic that has forever impacted our lives, our families lives and the lives of hundreds of thousands of other devastated families as well.

And if you will indulge me, I’d like to close with a prayer that I wrote which was read by my youngest sister at Zachary’s funeral service.

*You have broken me. I am disfigured beyond all recognition. How can You put me back together with such a vital piece missing?
I'll wait.*

And, as if You need any help from me, might I offer the following:

- Less artificial anxiety*
- Less wearisome worry*
- Less insidious selfishness*
- Less foolish pride*

And while You are at it:

- Add more love*
- Add more compassion*
- Add more empathy*

I get it now, less of me and more of You.

*And on last non-negotiable – I need the memory of Zachary Matthew Cullen knit as close to my heart as possible.
Period. Amen.*