



COMMITTEE ON
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DEMOCRATS
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Pallone Opening Remarks at Opioid Epidemic Hearing

“It is clear, the nation is in crisis and Congress must do more to address the opioid epidemic.”

Washington, D.C. – *Energy and Commerce Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks today at a Full Committee hearing on “Federal Efforts to Combat the Opioid Crisis: A Status Update on CARA and Other Initiatives:”*

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling today’s hearing. It provides the opportunity to hear from several agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services as well as the Drug Enforcement Administration about the opioid abuse epidemic and the status of federal efforts to combat the crisis, including the implementation of CARA and 21st Century Cures.

While I am pleased to hear from the witnesses before us today, I am disappointed that you did not invite the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services – CMS. Most people access substance abuse treatment through their health insurance coverage—it’s a fundamental link and one without the other leaves the millions of people of all ages that struggle with this addiction out in the cold. Between Medicare, Medicaid, CHIP and the ACA Marketplaces, well over a third of the population receives health insurance through the programs that CMS oversees. Medicaid alone is the single largest payer for behavioral health services in the United States. Put simply, a full and appropriate review of this issue requires the presence of CMS.

Unfortunately we all are too familiar with the tragic consequences of the opioid crisis. 91 Americans lose their lives to opioid overdose each day and millions more are battling this chronic and potentially deadly health condition. No community is immune. I know that like me, each Member here today has heard far too many tragic stories about lives cut short, families torn apart, and people left with few places to turn as they struggle to find treatment.

In New Jersey, more than 1,900 people died from opioids last year. The crisis has taken such a toll in my community that we are hearing cries for help from some unlikely places. Earlier this year, Peter Kulbacki, the owner of Brunswick Memorial Funeral Home in East Brunswick, New Jersey published a blog on the funeral home’s website expressing his

frustration with the monthly calls he receives telling him that someone has passed away from an opioid overdose. I would like to share a brief excerpt from his blog because I think it helps capture the true toll of this epidemic on families – “I am witness to the parents left with inexplicable grief. I am witness to the spouses left to carry the emotional and economic burden of raising a family alone. I am witness to the children who are left wondering, “why?”

Experiences like this reinforce the need for federal action to address this crisis. I am happy that last year we were able to work together on a bipartisan basis to pass CARA and 21st Century Cures. These laws are expanding access to treatment and recovery support services, as well as advancing efforts to prevent the misuse and abuse of opioids. For example, New Jersey is using the \$13 million it received as part of the larger Cures law to expand treatment and support services, invest in primary and secondary prevention and training. Through CARA, we also took steps to reduce the amount of opioids in circulation by permitting for the partial fill of controlled substance prescriptions and supporting the expansion of drug disposal sites for unwanted prescriptions.

These were positive steps in the right direction, but Committee Democrats have repeatedly stated that they were never enough. And sadly, the growing epidemic proves that today. These laws were a down payment on the type of efforts and increased funding that Congress must support to respond, and eventually end, this epidemic.

In addition to supporting positive bipartisan laws and increased funding for substance abuse initiatives, Republicans must end their pursuit of taking away health coverage from millions of Americans. This is the very thing that ensures people can actually access treatment. Republicans have spent all year sabotaging the Affordable Care Act and attempting to gut the Medicaid program by more than \$800 billion. This week, House Republicans, including most on this Committee, will support a budget that includes these cuts and more. If successful, these actions by Republicans would have an immediate and harsh impact on those struggling with addiction. I will continue to fight these efforts.

Advancing efforts to respond to this crisis also means Congress has a responsibility to figure out what went wrong, how it went wrong, and how to make sure something like this never happens again. That is why this Committee is conducting a bipartisan investigation into the role drug distributors may have played in the ongoing opioid crisis, and what systems failed to protect communities.

The Committee has sent a number of letters to several distributors and DEA requesting information about drug distribution practices, including the amount of opioids shipped into certain communities. Unfortunately, however, up to this point, we have had difficulty getting answers from DEA.

In fact, I asked a number of follow up questions to DEA following a Committee hearing in March about opioid distribution in rural West Virginia. After six months, DEA just last night sent us their responses to these questions. Of course there are also still many questions in our letters to DEA that remain unanswered. DEA has pledged its cooperation to work with the Committee, so I hope moving forward they can help us determine what systems failed in

West Virginia, and what needs to be done to make sure other communities are protected from such abusive practices.

It is clear, the nation is in crisis and Congress must do more to address the opioid epidemic. Thank you, I yield back.

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