

**Congresswoman Niki Tsongas**  
**Statement for the Record**  
**October 11, 2017**

**House Committee on Energy and Commerce**  
***Subcommittee on Health***  
**Member Day: Testimony and Proposals on the Opioid Crisis**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and members of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today on the opioid epidemic, a health crisis indiscriminately affecting communities across this country.

In my home state of Massachusetts, there were an estimated 2,107 opioid-related deaths in 2016, an increase of over two-hundred percent in the last ten years.<sup>1</sup> To put that increase in perspective on a national level, according to news reports, in 2016, more Americans died of drug overdoses than have ever died from car crashes, gun violence, or HIV/AIDS during any single year.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to the work of this committee, Congress has taken several steps to begin to address this crisis, but the stunning rise in opioid misuse, addiction and deaths calls on us to do more.

When people become addicted to painkillers, and then lose access to their prescription drug, many turn to illegally obtaining cheaper, more potent opioids such as heroin and synthetic drugs.

According to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, across the United States, over 21,000 overdose deaths were caused by synthetic opioids between February 2016 and February 2017, twice as many as the previous twelve month period. One of the leading contributors to this number is fentanyl, a deadly synthetic opioid that can be up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times more powerful than morphine. Fentanyl has become the leading cause of overdose deaths nationwide, surpassing heroin in the summer of 2016.<sup>3</sup>

Although pharmaceutical fentanyl can be misused, most fentanyl deaths are linked to illicitly-manufactured fentanyl and illicit versions of chemically similar compounds known as fentanyl analogs.

In Massachusetts, the proportion of overdose deaths attributed to fentanyl is rising at a meteoric rate. At its lowest, in the third quarter of 2014, fentanyl was present in 18 percent of opioid-related deaths in Massachusetts. However, in 2016, fentanyl was present in a staggering 69

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<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts Department of Public Health. "Opioid-related Overdose Deaths among MA Residents – August 2017." <https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2017/08/31/data-brief-overdose-deaths-aug-2017.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Lopez, German. "America's opioid epidemic is so bad it's causing average life expectancy to drop." *Vox Media*. September 20, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/9/20/16338996/drug-overdoses-life-expectancy>

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts." <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>

percent of the state's opioid-related deaths, resulting in 1,400 fentanyl-related deaths in the Commonwealth.<sup>4</sup>

The primary sources of fentanyl are outside the United States, principally Mexico and China. The drug is smuggled across the U.S. border or delivered through the mail or private carriers. Fentanyl can also be ordered online. And because of its extreme potency, fentanyl typically comes in small amounts, making it more difficult for authorities to detect.

That is why earlier this year I introduced bipartisan legislation with Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA) to provide Customs and Border Protection (CBP) with the latest in chemical screening devices and scientific support to detect and intercept fentanyl and other synthetic opioids.

Not only would these devices allow law enforcement to detect and confiscate fentanyl before it enters the United States, but it would also protect law enforcement officers on the front lines from exposure to the deadly narcotic, which is so powerful that coming into contact with just a few grains can be fatal.

The House Committee on Homeland Security recently passed our bill, the International Narcotics Trafficking Emergency Response by Detecting Incoming Contraband with Technology, or INTERDICT, Act by voice vote and we are now urging House leadership to bring it to the Floor.

The INTERDICT Act would be an important step towards stemming the rapid influx of illicit synthetic opioids, including fentanyl. However, to most effectively have an impact on this heart-wrenching epidemic, we must establish a comprehensive, fully-funded plan at the local, state and federal level. Congress must continue to demonstrate its commitment to ending this epidemic by supporting the programs, agencies, organizations and individuals on the front lines.

We cannot afford to let our friends, family members and neighbors suffer under the burden and stigma of addiction and mental illness – especially given the scope and magnitude of the issue nationwide. My colleagues from all parts of the country, both Democrats and Republicans, have heard similar stories from their districts and we owe it to our communities to do all we can to head off this national epidemic.

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<sup>4</sup> Massachusetts Department of Public Health. "Opioid-related Overdose Deaths among MA Residents – May 2017." <https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2017/08/31/data-brief-overdose-deaths-may-2017.pdf>