

I'd like to thank Chairman Burgess and Ranking Member Green for providing us this opportunity for members to share how the opioid crisis is affecting their constituents, including my neighbors in Pinellas County, Florida.

The statistics for opioid deaths and disorders are shocking. Our society's use of opioids has truly become an epidemic. Last year, 11.8 million Americans aged 12 or older misused opioids, including nearly 900,000 children aged 12-17. Over 50 percent of the people with both substance abuse and a mental health disorder do not receive treatment for either issue.

Tragically, my home State of Florida was the prescription drug abuse capital of the United States in the last decade. They were known as "pill mills" and prescribed massive amounts of otherwise legal narcotics, which were then distributed into our neighborhoods, schools, communities, and throughout the country. When I was Governor, we went after "pill mills" and put them out of business.

While Florida may have won the battle against these "pill mills", our country is losing the war on opioid abuse and its addiction. We're ignoring mental health, underfunding addiction treatment, side-stepping what the science tells us is the best way to fight addiction. And now the scope of the crisis has broadened beyond prescription drugs – into heroin and even fentanyl. My home of Pinellas County was no exception. Last year we saw a string of deaths from Xanax mixed with fentanyl. In 2015, heroin, fentanyl, and oxycodone were responsible for over 3,800 deaths in Florida alone. It is a tragedy. It is an epidemic. And the need for action is immediate. I saw the devastation firsthand recently when I visited the non-profit "Operation PAR" in my district just a few months ago. I heard directly from those in recovery, being helped by their innovative, more holistic approach.

If we are going to combat this problem, we can't concentrate on law enforcement alone. Florida should serve as an example to the rest of the country that only going after suppliers is insufficient. Let's be clear: the people who misuse opioids aren't the worst of the worst;

they are our neighbors, our friends, parents, and children who are desperately in need of help. They often suffer in silence and isolation because of the stigma and shame surrounding drug abuse. Unfortunately, America learned this lesson the hard way treating the crack epidemic as simply a law enforcement exercise.

We can't combat our opioid crisis without investing in new treatment options, long-term mental health and substance abuse recovery resources, and the men and women on the ground working in non-profits and government, collaborating with first responders and law enforcement, to help those in need in all of our communities. This includes funding for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service (SAMHSA) and the National Institutes of Health, which provides the research and innovative treatments not often permitted using traditional funding. This funding provides grants, including in Pinellas County, for innovative, local solutions for treating mental health and substance abuse disorders, like what's happening at "Operation PAR" and "Bent Not Broken" organization. This includes funding overdose reversal. We will lose this fight without naloxone. Americans will die unnecessarily. And because Florida did not expand Medicaid, funding for these organizations is even more vital, and something I hope your committee continues to prioritize in this ongoing battle.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share how my home of Pinellas County is combating the opioid crisis. Thank you Mr. Chairman and Committee.