

Statement of the Hon. Ben Ray Luján
Health Subcommittee Hearing “Member Day: Testimony and Proposals on the Opioid Crisis”
October 11, 2017

I thank the Chairs and Ranking Members for the opportunity to discuss how New Mexico has been impacted by the opioid crisis.

501 New Mexican died of drug overdoses deaths in 2015.

Across this county, there were 52,404 deaths in 2015 and more than 560,000 deaths between 1999 and 2015.

A half million people who missed Thanksgiving dinner, or their daughter’s softball game. Half-a-million who weren’t able to help their son with their math homework or kiss their spouse goodnight.

That’s brothers, sisters, parents, friends, and children that we lost too soon because, in part, Congress has not responded forcefully enough to this crisis.

Last Congress, we did important work by passing the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (CARA), and 21st Century Cures Act.

These were steps in the right direction but these efforts alone are not enough.

I’ve heard from my community that the funding passed in 21st Century Cures is helpful, but hard to use. In part, this is because of the short funding period, which impacts communities’ ability to plan for the long-term and expand capacity.

We know that in too many areas like New Mexico, there are simply not enough people and resources. Many want help and can’t get it.

I am reminded of a story relayed to me by one of my constituents, Jay, who had stopped using heroin on his own, but felt as if he was going to relapse and sought help at a local treatment facility.

Jay was turned away and told to come back only when he started using again, because they lacked the capacity to treat patients who were not active drug users. That’s simply not right.

To really expand the treatment, prevention, and wrap around services that our constituents need, we must increase funding and create stability.

We need to give local governments and organizations the ability to plan – and not fear losing vital support from Congress. Most of all we need to give Jay a place to go after he’s fought a tough fight on his own.

That is why I introduced the Opioid and Heroin Abuse Crisis Investment Act to continue the funding to combat the opioid epidemic we passed in 21st Century Cures for an additional 5 years. I would welcome

my colleagues support because we absolutely must extend this funding for an additional 5 years and beyond.

However, this still isn't enough, which is why we must look at new efforts to drive vital investments to help those in need and address the barriers to appropriate, quality, and accessible treatment.

These barriers include a decaying rural mental health and substance abuse treatment infrastructure, lack of regional coordination of treatment resources, lack of support for rural physicians providing substance abuse treatment, administrative barriers against the most effective form of opioid abuse treatment, and a shortage of rural physicians who provide Medication Assisted Treatment.

We as a committee, must recognize that 'hoping for the best' is not valid public policy. There is no quick-fix to solve this opioid epidemic.

We need to advance serious legislation that takes into account long-term planning for the federal government, and for states and communities. We need to bring it to the floor of the House, and we need to send it to the President's desk.

I fear that until we recognize this fact, we will continue to lose brothers, sisters, parents, friends, and children.