

The Honorable Rep. Doris Matsui
Member Testimony
E&C Member Day on the Opioid Crisis
October 11, 2017 at 10:15AM

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting us to testify today about proposals to address our nation's opioid epidemic. We all have heartbreaking stories of constituents whose lives were lost too soon to an opioid overdose. In my home district of Sacramento, we experienced a particularly deadly overdose crisis last year due to the introduction of pills contaminated with fentanyl, which is as much as 50 times stronger than heroin.

Addiction is a devastating disease that knows no bounds and impacts us all, and we must come together to provide solutions in a comprehensive manner.

In this Committee, we took a first step by passing the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, or CARA, into law last year. We need to build on those efforts; understanding addiction and its consequences are multi-pronged, we need a multi-pronged solution.

I look at this problem as I do any other health care problem or disease, which means I examine it holistically across the spectrum from prevention to early intervention to treatment.

In the case of the opioid epidemic, there is a lot we can do at each of these stages, all of which rest on truly building up our nation's mental health system and integrating behavioral health care with physical health care.

If people are able to get behavioral health treatment when they need it in their communities, we can start to address the root causes of addiction and prevent and catch issues earlier. Historically, mental health and addiction have been treated as character flaws and therefore not addressed with evidence-based medical treatment. We can reverse that course by making treatment more available, bolstering our mental health workforce, and reducing stigma.

In 2012, Rep. Lance and Senators Stabenow, Blunt, and I passed the Excellence in Mental Health Demonstration project into law. This project is allowing states and local communities to demonstrate that building up Community-Based Behavioral Health Clinics, in coordination with physical health clinics and community resources, will improve access to care. This project is currently in eight states, and last week we introduced the Excellence in Mental Health and Addiction Treatment Expansion Act to extend the years of the demo and expand it to more states. We should strongly consider this project and legislation as a way to build up community care to address the opioid crisis.

We also need to ensure that mental health parity is truly achieved. When an insurance company offers mental health benefits, they should be equal to physical health benefits offered. We need to ensure that this rule is being followed across the country. However, the rule is irrelevant if mental health benefits are not offered in the first place. Trumpcare proposals have included provisions that allow states to waive essential health benefits, meaning insurers would once again not be required to cover mental health and addiction treatment. Cutting billions of dollars from

the Medicaid program would also mean loss of coverage for millions of Americans suffering from substance use disorder. We cannot take these steps backward.

I am encouraged by steps that are being taken across the health care sector to address the crisis. Prescribers and insurers are limiting opioid prescriptions , such as for pain following a surgery, to seven days. This prevents bottles of extra unused pills from sitting in people's medicine cabinets, as do prescription drug "take back" days where people can turn in unused pills to the DEA.

We need to build on these efforts and work together across the system. That includes considering proposals in Congress that provide resources and training for state and local law enforcement, bolstering our mental health workforce, educating the public on what they can do to prevent or react to a crisis, addressing the availability of a range of treatment options from outpatient to inpatient to residential care, and more. I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee on policy proposals to address this pressing issue.