

CONGRESSMAN ROGER MARSHALL, M.D.

– Energy & Commerce Committee Member Day, October 11, 2017

As a practicing physician for nearly 3 decades, and now a freshman Congressman, I have had a unique perspective from which to understand the causes, and to identify solutions for the opioid crisis we face.

Over the last decade, it has become clear that many actions taken by the medical community to better-address pain, such as pain-scales, and stronger pain treatments for chronic diseases or cancer, have helped fuel an opioid epidemic that is killing an unprecedented number of Americans.

While we began to improve the restrictions on prescribing these painkillers, tens of thousands of addicted people turned to street-level drugs as cheap, potent alternatives.

Today, I don't pretend to have all the answers or solutions to this complex situation, but there are some simple things already being done that have proven successful.

One part of the solution is quality community addiction treatment. For 50 years, Valley Hope in Norton, KS, has treated over 300,000 patients. They address substance-abuse as a chronic health care problem, just like you would treat hypertension or diabetes. They don't treat it as some sort of moral deficiency.

Valley Hope also recognizes that opioid addiction has a second withdrawal about a month after stopping the use of narcotics. It is that secondary withdrawal that patients are most likely to overdose. Patients go back to taking the amount of drugs they usually took to get high. Their bodies cannot metabolize like they used to, and the patient overdoses and stops breathing.

The key to avoiding these disasters is to maintain contact through weekly follow ups and outpatient checkups. The future treatment for opioid abuse will be found in rewarding good outpatient management, and institutions that pride themselves in low rates of readmission and relapse.

Solving this crisis begins in the doctor's office. Physicians, nurses and patients must all be willing to understand the potential for addiction when they prescribe, administer or take medications.

When we pair this understanding with capable community treatment, along with respect, compassion and empathy toward those suffering, we will have taken the first steps to overcome this challenge.