

Congressman Brett Guthrie Opening Statement – 06/21/23

As Prepared for Delivery

Today we are here to examine the SUPPORT Act and how its implementation has helped increase access to prevention, treatment, and recovery services. Since the passage of the SUPPORT Act, there have been several efforts to address issues related to substance use disorder and drug overdoses, which include the Restoring Hope for Mental Health and Well-being Act, and the HALT Fentanyl Act . This hearing will give us the opportunity to see what legislative solutions have been working and address any potential gaps.

Earlier this month, we convened a field hearing in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania where we had the opportunity to hear from addiction experts to learn more about how policies from the SUPPORT Act have helped in the fight against drug overdoses and what more can be done. We heard heart wrenching testimony from Michael Straley, who lost his daughter, Leah on Valentines Day a few years ago to a fentanyl poisoning. Tragically, there are hundreds of thousands of stories, like Michael's. The evidence is clear that we have more work to do to effectively curb historically high drug overdose rates.

In just the past two years, more than 100,000 Americans have tragically lost their lives to drug overdoses, a jump from 70,000 per year before the pandemic, driven by synthetic opioids, such as illicit fentanyl and the despair of lockdowns. In Kentucky, over 70% of all drug overdoses are caused by illicit fentanyl.

Fortunately, this Committee has already shown it is ready to lead the way on addressing this crisis by championing the the HALT Fentanyl Act to help keep these poisons off our streets. However, our work here is far from over, and in the face of a new wave of emerging drug threats, it's more important than ever this Committee recommit to addressing this crisis. I'm pleased by a number of the bipartisan bills before us today, because I believe they will help make a difference in the lives of the millions of Americans counting on us.

Key to ensuring success will be to focus on prevention efforts. For example, we are considering legislation to address the threat of Xylazine or "tranq," a tranquilizer routinely used for animals that is quickly becoming one of the deadliest street drugs. H.R. 1839, the Combating Illicit Xylazine Act, led by Representative Pfluger, would subject individuals who distribute this substance illegally to schedule III penalties.

To supplement this work, we are considering legislation to continue and enhance funding for state-level Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs, allow federal funding to be used for fentanyl and xylazine testing strips in states where they are legal, and help ensure access to all FDA-approved overdose reversal medications.

Prevention however, must also be coupled with policies that promote access to care to help those currently struggling with addiction. As such, we are considering legislation today that will provide access to reliable care for vulnerable populations, including those living with co-occurring severe mental illness and substance use disorder, medication assisted treatment for Medicaid patients, treatment services for foster care youth and for pregnant or post-partum women.

Of note, H.R. 3892, the Improving Mental Health and Drug Treatment Act, will lift the antiquated IMD Exclusion for residential and in-patient services . The Exclusion, which arbitrarily limits access to residential care to facilities with sixteen or fewer beds has been a significant barrier to care for vulnerable populations, including homeless populations and children that are currently being boarded and treated in emergency departments for severe mental illness and substance use disorder rather than being able to get care in a clinically appropriate setting. Living on the streets or in Emergency Departments only exacerbates the health care issues these individuals are facing, and this legislation will ensure patients are receiving the most appropriate and comprehensive care to address their needs. Thank you to Dr. Burgess for your historic leadership on this important issue and I look forward to moving this bill forward.

We are also examining solutions that will promote long-term recovery and wrap-around services to support individuals' journey to rehabilitate their lives. This includes H.R. 4088, the CAREER Act, introduced by fellow Kentuckian Representative Barr, which reauthorizes targeted workforce training grants for individuals in recovery to help them get back on their feet.

Additionally, this includes my bill, H.R. 1502, the Comprehensive Opioid Recovery Centers Reauthorization Act of 2023, which reauthorizes the Comprehensive Opioid Recovery Centers program for five years. The CORCs program is responsible for providing wrap-around treatment and recovery support services, including workforce training, to individuals living in communities with disproportionately drug overdose rates.

I am proud of the early results of this program, which has enrolled over 260 individuals through 2022, led to a 70% decrease in unemployment for these individuals and a 50% decrease in the drug abuse screening test in 6 months from baseline. I am proud of these early results, and I look forward to working to reauthorize this program to support long term recovery. I would like to thank Representatives Tonko, Bucshon, and Peters for their partnership on this issue.

Before I close, I would like to touch on bills before us that would attempt to support the behavioral health needs of those moving in and out of the criminal justice system. There is more we need to do to address access to care for these individuals, so they can get the right care as they reenter their communities. However, I cannot support the two proposals before us in their current form, because I believe they would lead to massive cost-shifting from state spending to federal spending without providing for a targeted solution to the problems at hand. Nonetheless, I look forward to identifying long-term solutions that are fiscally responsible and that empower states to provide access to care for incarcerated individuals.

I look forward to continuing the process to reauthorize the SUPPORT Act and I thank my colleagues on the committee for leading on many of these bipartisan policies.