

U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Attacking America's Epidemic of Heroin and Prescription Drug Abuse

January 27, 2016

Senator Kelly Ayotte Statement for the Record

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Leahy, and members of the committee:

Thank you for holding today's important hearing to discuss the most urgent public health and safety issue facing my home state of New Hampshire—the heroin and prescription opioid abuse epidemic. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am honored to be here alongside Senator Portman—who has been a leader on this issue, including through his work on the bipartisan Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act. I've appreciated the opportunity to work with him, as well as with Senators Whitehouse and Klobuchar, and many others on this committee to reintroduce and improve that legislation, and I look forward to continuing our work to get this bill passed and signed into law.

I'm also pleased to be here with my colleague, Senator Shaheen, who has also been working on this issue. Last fall, we hosted a Homeland Security Committee field hearing in New Hampshire and invited top federal officials from Washington to hear first-hand from members of our treatment community, local law enforcement, and families affected by the epidemic. I especially appreciated that Director Botticelli of the Office of National Drug Control Policy took part in that hearing.

I know that Governor Shumlin is also confronting this issue head-on in neighboring Vermont.

In the third panel, you will hear from Nick Willard, Chief of Police for the City of Manchester. As New Hampshire's largest city, Manchester has been hit particularly hard by this epidemic. Chief Willard and law enforcement across our state are on the front lines of this crisis every day, and I have learned so much from meeting with them and listening to what they're witnessing as they deal with this problem. I am grateful that he is here to share his first-hand experience with the committee.

In New Hampshire, the number of drug overdose deaths is staggering: In 2014, there were over 320 drug overdose deaths. As of January 8, the number of drug overdose deaths for New Hampshire for 2015 was 385—148 of which could be attributed to fentanyl alone. The Chief Medical Examiner's Office has estimated that the final number of drug overdose deaths for 2015 will ultimately exceed 400.

These tragic statistics are more than just numbers. They are family members, friends and neighbors. I've had too many families come to me and tell me that they've lost a daughter, or a son, or mother – this epidemic is touching every community in our state.

Solving this crisis requires a comprehensive approach. Over the past two years, I've spent a lot of time meeting with families, treatment providers, law enforcement, first responders, health professionals and individuals in recovery to better understand what they're seeing and to identify ways that we can help at the federal level.

Whether it's speaking with families, hosting community forums, or riding along with first responders when they respond to overdose calls, these experiences have all served to reinforce my commitment to work with anyone to find effective solutions to this problem. And that is why I am proud to be an original cosponsor of the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act—bipartisan legislation that has the support of over 120 groups across the nation, including the National District Attorneys Association, the Major County Sheriffs' Association, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, and the National Association of Attorneys General.

The Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act would expand opioid abuse prevention and education efforts, expand the availability of Narcan to first responders and law enforcement, support additional resources to identify and treat incarcerated individuals struggling with substance use disorders, expand drug take-back efforts to promote safe disposal of unused or unwanted prescriptions, strengthen prescription drug monitoring programs, and launch a prescription opioid and heroin treatment and intervention program.

CARA would be a strong step towards combatting this epidemic, both in my state and across the country. I urge this Committee and the full Senate to quickly pass this bill so we can take meaningful action to help save lives.

Finally, I want to touch on the role of fentanyl in drug overdose deaths. Fentanyl continues to cause more drug overdose deaths in New Hampshire than heroin. Eric Spofford, CEO of the Granite House and New Freedom Academy in New Hampshire, has said that fentanyl is a "serial killer." It should be treated as the deadly drug we know that it is.

In September of last year, I introduced the Stop Trafficking in Fentanyl Act to reform trafficking penalties for fentanyl, ensuring that the law appropriately reflects the potency of this drug—which is estimated by the DEA to be up to 50 times more powerful than heroin—and takes into account its increasing prevalence in drug overdose deaths.

Law enforcement is working tirelessly to take these drugs off the streets. But we can't simply "arrest our way out of" this problem. I've actually heard from law enforcement in New Hampshire that key pieces they need to confront this public safety issue are more prevention efforts, more treatment options and more support for individuals in recovery. CARA would address all of these priorities.

I'm encouraged that we've made some progress by passing the Protecting Our Infants Act, as well as increasing funding for substance abuse prevention and treatment programs and law enforcement programs in the appropriations bill that was recently signed into law. Those are positive first steps, but we have much work to do to turn the tide of addiction.

Passing CARA would provide much-needed resources and support in the fight against this epidemic, and I urge this Committee to swiftly take up this legislation and send it to the full Senate.

Again, thank you the opportunity to take part in today's hearing. I look forward to continuing to partner with you on solutions that will help save lives.