



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Homeland Security Implications of the Opioid Crisis

July 25, 2019

As I have said before, the opioid epidemic is truly a national problem affecting people of all races, income levels, and ages. Our healthcare, emergency response, and law enforcement professionals have stepped up to the plate. But we are asking them to combat a complex and dangerous problem while they are already under-resourced.

The danger is self-evident. Look no further than an alert issued last week by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General, showing that CBP did not adequately protect its employees from possible fentanyl exposure. The Inspector General found that CBP lacks necessary precautions to protect its staff, including lifesaving drugs in the case of accidental exposure, and mandatory training and workplace policies to keep employees safe. It goes without saying that this alert was sobering. I am glad to hear that CBP has taken corrective action, and I look forward to testimony today regarding other improvements the Department can make in this area. I am also pleased to see the Administration finally released their national drug control strategy earlier this year, but I remain worried that they are missing the mark in terms of offering effective solutions.

The same month the President's strategy was released, he claimed his border wall would stop the influx of drugs causing the opioid crisis in the United States. However, we know that the majority of drugs enter our country through ports of entry and that a wall would do nothing to halt this traffic. In fact, nearly 90 percent of hard drugs such as fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, and heroin are seized at ports of entry, not smuggled between ports of entry. Moreover, we have learned from OIG reports and other forms of research – like the work from our witness from the RAND Corporation – that traffickers in China and elsewhere are exploiting our mail system to ship opioids into the United States.

Funding must be allocated for non-intrusive inspection at ports of entry and mail facilities, additional frontline personnel for ports of entry, and better tools to help encourage our international partners to work with us in the fight to curb this epidemic. That is why I am glad to see Members of the Committee have put forth common sense solutions to address this issue. As Chairman Rose stated in his opening remarks, he authored a bill to help address China's role in the trafficking of fentanyl. That legislation was recently passed by the House and I look forward to it being approved in final form by Congress and being sent to the President for signature. Additionally, Rep. Langevin again introduced his bipartisan Joint Task Force to Combat Opioid Trafficking Act, which would authorize the Department of Homeland Security to establish a Joint Task Force to better coordinate the interdiction of fentanyl and other opioids. This important bill was reported out by this Committee on a bipartisan basis just last week.

Congress must continue to advocate for policies like increasing access to medications that work to counteract overdose symptoms for our frontline workers, request additional funding to ensure adequate security protocols are in place, and work in lockstep with our State, Local, Tribal and Territorial partners to end this crisis.

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