



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations Subcommittee Chairwoman Kathleen Rice (D-NY)

Homeland Security Implications of the Opioid Crisis

July 25, 2019

Today our Subcommittees are examining the challenges we face in addressing one of the most severe health crises in our nation's history. Last year alone, more than 48,000 people in the United States died as a result of an opioid overdose, with fentanyl and other synthetic opioids claiming the vast majority of the victims...nearly 40,000 in total. These numbers emphasize a critical fact: we are currently in a new phase – a third wave – of the devastating opioid crisis, one characterized by dangerous and deadly synthetic opioids, known as fentanyl analogues.

Today, we are here to learn what innovative solutions can be used to address this crisis. The third wave of the opioids crisis is distinct from earlier phases of the epidemic, which were characterized by prescription drug abuse and a surge in heroin addiction that overwhelmed public health officials. As destructive as the earlier stages were, the challenges we are now facing are far greater and more vexing than ever. And they demand an aggressive bipartisan solution. As we all know, the prescription opioids that began this epidemic were produced and, for a time, obtained legally. And the heroin epidemic that followed was primarily imported into United States along traditional narcotics routes.

However, traffickers in fentanyl and other synthetics are exploiting an entirely different model. Based on recent data, the majority of synthetic opioids originate in labs in China and often enter our country through the U.S. postal system. Furthermore, these substances can be ordered through dark web e-commerce sites and arrive at mailing facilities in small, untraceable quantities. Because synthetics are difficult to detect using existing technology, it is extraordinarily hard to stop their distribution once they reach our mail facilities. It has become frustratingly apparent that we cannot tackle this problem using existing technology and law enforcement strategies. Effective solutions must be bold and innovative. First, we need to eliminate manufacturing centers for synthetic opioids and second, we need to prevent their movement through the international mail system.

While successfully achieving these goals will take broad collaboration across government agencies, this Committee has already taken a significant—and I am happy to say a bipartisan—step forward. Last week we passed out of Committee the Joint Task Force to Combat Opioid Trafficking Act, sponsored by Mr. Langevin. This vital piece of legislation was passed by bipartisan consensus in the 115th Congress, before stalling in the Senate. It is essential that we now support its passage on the House floor and work with our colleagues in the Senate to ensure that it passes there as well. This important bill authorizes collaboration with the private sector on this challenge, allowing the new DHS Joint Task Force to work with the private companies whose activities are being exploited by traffickers. Improved screening procedures, greater targeting of suspicious senders, and better information sharing processes can all help our law enforcement agencies in interdicting fentanyl analogues before they reach our borders.

Although our priority must be stopping synthetic opioids, we must also ensure the safety of DHS law enforcement personnel. A recent management alert issued by the DHS Inspector General identified significant failures on the part of CBP to protect its frontline personnel tasked with handling and storing seized fentanyl and fentanyl analogues. Specifically, numerous CBP facilities failed to keep Naloxone, an effective antidote to fentanyl, readily available in storage vaults and other locations where agents interact with fentanyl. DHS must have efficient methods for protecting its personnel from accidental contact with fentanyl and Congress must conduct sufficient oversight to ensure that these protective steps are being taken at all facilities. With these goals in mind, I welcome the witnesses who have joined us here today. You all are experts in the fields of narcotics interdiction and law enforcement and I look forward to hearing your testimony.

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