

**Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)**

**Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency**

**Field Hearing:**

***Opioids in the Homeland: DHS Coordination with State and Local Partners to Fight the Epidemic***

**June 19, 2018**

Each day, more than 115 people die in America from opioid-related drug overdoses, and the number of deaths is on the rise. In 2016, more than 15,000 drug overdose deaths involved heroin and more than 19,000 involved synthetic opioids such as fentanyl. The opioid epidemic is truly a national problem affecting people of all races, income levels, and ages.

The impact of the epidemic is felt not only by families and communities who have lost loved ones, but it also negatively affects the country's health care system and economy.

Unfortunately, President Trump has not implemented a national drug control strategy to stem the flow of opioids across America's borders. Rather, Trump has cobbled together bad policies aimed at reducing opioid prescriptions and increasing prison sentences. These policies ignore the fact that most fentanyl misuse is attributed to illicitly produced fentanyl being trafficked from China. Also, as demonstrated in the 1980s during the crack cocaine epidemic, tougher prison sentences don't result in less access to drugs.

History tells us that ramping up law enforcement as a response to a health crisis disproportionately affects minority communities. Under the "war on drugs" approach—which Attorney General Jeff Sessions has alluded to bringing back—the nation's prison population rapidly multiplied, filling America's prisons mostly with first-time offender, African American men facing harsh sentences. Those struggling with drug abuse, regardless of their demographics, ought to be given the proper treatment and rehabilitation services.

Moreover, President Trump's zero-tolerance immigration policy and obsession with building a border wall has distracted him from the real need to increase resources at ports of entry and mail facilities to detect and seize opioids. The vast majority of all opioids entering the U.S. are seized at ports of entry across the United States. Prioritizing the border wall over ports of entry will impede our ability to end the opioid crisis.

Today, the House voted on H.R. 5762, the "Joint Task Force to Combat Opioid Trafficking Act," a Democratic measure introduced by my colleague Mr. Langevin, to help prevent the trafficking of opioids into the United States. The "Joint Task Force to Combat Opioid Trafficking Act of 2018" authorizes 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 by the Committee on Homeland Security on a bipartisan basis.

Fusion centers can play a critical role in ending America's opioid epidemic. Originally created to gather and share intelligence following the attacks of 9/11, fusion centers have started collecting data on drug overdoses and seizures to identify emerging trends to reduce the severity and prevent overdoses all together. Therefore, I look forward to today's hearing highlighting what fusions centers composed of federal, state and local officials can accomplish when they work together, especially to save lives.