

Opening Statement  
Chair Diana DeGette  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations  
Energy and Commerce Committee  
Hearing on “A Public Health Emergency: State Efforts to Curb the Opioid Crisis”  
January 14, 2020

As I said, today, the Committee continues its bipartisan efforts to combat the opioid crisis.

As we know, the country is in the midst of an epidemic unlike any in recent history. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, from 1999 to 2017, nearly 400,000 people died from opioid overdoses. In 2017, more than two-thirds of drug overdose deaths involved opioids.

This crisis has continued to evolve, and the challenges that we face have continued to evolve along with it. The “first wave” of this crisis began in the 1990s with the over-prescribing of pain medication. The “second wave” began in 2010 with increased deaths due to heroin overdoses.

Like the first two waves, the “third wave” – marked by the rise of synthetic opioids such as fentanyl – have shattered lives, traumatized families, and devastated communities.

Now, unfortunately, it looks like a “fourth wave” of the crisis may have already arrived. The opioid epidemic has fueled a huge increase in methamphetamine use. In 2018, there were more than twice as many deaths involving meth as 2015, and meth is increasingly turning up in overdose deaths and drug busts across the country.

Given the complexity of the epidemic and its ability to evolve, states, federal government agencies, and Congress must remain vigilant.

To that end, this Committee has taken numerous steps to investigate the origins and drivers of the crisis so we can learn from it as we try to get ahead of the next wave. Through Committee hearings, we have heard from states, federal agencies, and drug distributors about their roles and responses.

The groundbreaking work by the Committee uncovered some of the failures that led to where we are today. And looking forward, we’re focused on identifying ways to stem this crisis and bring relief to the millions of Americans who are suffering.

As part of that effort, our Committee has worked across the aisle to pass bipartisan legislation designed to give states the tools and resources needed to help those impacted by substance use disorder.

These legislative packages provided states billions of dollars in federal funding to assist in opioid response, treatment, and recovery efforts.

And we have made some progress. CDC provisional data indicates that drug overdose deaths have fallen for the first time in decades. While this downward shift is welcome news, this crisis is far from over – and we must continue to look for ways to bring relief to struggling cities and towns throughout the country.

Today's hearing continues those bipartisan efforts. Day in and day out, states are on the front lines of this epidemic that kills more than 130 Americans every day. As the epidemic now enters a new decade, states face the challenge of keeping pace with an evolving crisis.

In keeping with this Committee's bipartisan commitment to finding solutions to this national emergency, last September, the Committee sent letters to 16 states requesting information about on-the-ground efforts to curb the epidemic.

The Committee has sought to understand whether federal funds actually reached the hardest hit communities, how states used funds provided by Congress, and what strategies have proven to be successful.

Today, we have five key states that have each received a letter from this Committee. These states represent the first line of defense against the crisis and they each play pivotal roles in treatment, recovery, and prevention efforts. I want to thank all of you for coming today.

The states compose a large swath of the country. While their demographics, geography, and challenges vary, each has felt the effect of the epidemic, and they all rank among the states with some of the highest overdose death rates.

As such, each of them have taken a number of steps to curb the epidemic.

For example, Pennsylvania was able to distribute nearly 13,000 naloxone kits free of charge in 2018 and again in 2019, thanks to a combination of state and federal funding.

North Carolina provided treatment to 12,000 uninsured persons, thanks again to federal funding.

And Rhode Island has been able to expand medication-assisted treatment in the prison system, resulting in a 62 percent reduction in overdose deaths.

These are just a few examples of how the states are fighting this epidemic and helping communities.

As Congress considers future action to address this crisis, all of our witnesses today provide important insights on how federal funds are being used to combat the epidemic, what efforts are proving successful, and what we need to do for further improvement.

I thank the witnesses for their service, for being here today to testify on behalf of their states. And I look forward to hearing how we can all continue to work together to find the desperately needed solutions.