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“Tackling Fentanyl: The China Connection”

Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

*Rep. Chris. Smith (R-NJ), Chairman
September 6, 2018
Excerpts of Remarks*

Chinese-made fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, is killing Americans— more than 29,000 in 2017 alone. We must hold the Chinese government accountable.

Kirsten D. Madison, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs will testify that China is “a primary source of illicit synthetic drugs coming to the United States.”

Paul E. Knierim, Deputy Chief of Operations at the Office of Global Enforcement for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), stated in his testimony that “China is one of the world's top producers of the precursor chemicals used to manufacture methamphetamine and fentanyl, as well as the chemicals used to process heroin and cocaine.”

Ocean County, New Jersey Prosecutor Joseph Coronato, has called the China-made fentanyl sent into the United States a “synthetic storm” that is “devastating.”

He will note thankfully that local law enforcement is doing something about it— like his program that allows drug abusers to voluntarily turn themselves in at a police station—more than 800 since 2017—without being prosecuted. A program that has almost certainly reduced deaths.

Still, Prosecutor Coronato will note that based on his medical examiner toxicology analysis, in 2014, 10 percent of overdose deaths had fentanyl in their systems. Shockingly, in 2018, fentanyl-related deaths have jumped to 80 percent or more

He will also tell the committee that “synthetics will become the predominate type of illegal drugs abused within the next 5 years” and that “in many instances” it is being sold “right over the internet.”

I will ask both the State Department and DEA what the U.S. is doing to hold China accountable for fentanyl in the U.S. Are we using existing tools to hold bad actors in China accountable? We have tools, such as the Global Magnitsky Act, which targets corrupt officials and human rights abusers.

Recently the House passed comprehensive legislation to address the opioid crisis including the Synthetics and Overdose Prevention Act. The bill requires the U.S. Postal Service (as private carriers like UPS and Fed-Ex are currently required to do) to obtain advance electronic data (AED)—detailed info on the shipper and addressee and other data—empowering Customs and Border Protection to target fentanyl and other illegal drug shipments.

Bryce Pardo of the RAND Corporation will testify that the potency of fentanyl has sharply increased the number of opioid overdoses... and that the drug overdose crisis now surpasses major public health epidemics of prior generations, including the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Every single Congressional district in America has felt the scourge of the opioid epidemic. Don Holman, who is in the audience today, lost his son, Garrett, to an overdose of synthetic fentanyl. Don’s written testimony submitted to the committee, reports that the package came straight from China. His son ordered it online, not knowing of the poisonous effects fentanyl has.

Last week, I spoke at the Mercer County, International Overdose Awareness Day sponsored by Prosecutor Angelo Onofri and Robbinsville Mayor David Fried. Personal testimonies offered by survivors and recovering abusers were deeply moving.

Trenton Police Chief Pedro Medina spoke of the loss of his son, Petey, and assured the audience that there is a “God who can help all of you.”

Advocate Mark Manning, who lost his son Christopher, spoke of his ongoing pain but urged all to work together to help the vulnerable.

And Adrienne Petta recounted the horrors of her addiction and the impact on her family—she is now a recovery specialist.

For the record, Monmouth County Prosecutor Christopher Gramiccioni's Opioids Diversion Program, steers certain low-level nonviolent offenders to treatment rather than traditional criminal prosecution, and Mercer County Prosecutor Angelo Onofri's Community Addiction Recovery Effort (CARE) program which emphasizes treatment-first interventions for opioid addicts.

We must look at this as a disease. Go after those who are marketing and selling fentanyl and offer programs and assistance to those who need help.