




**TO:** *United States Senate Special Committee of Aging  
Chairman Rick Scott*

**FROM:** *Sheriff Dennis M. Lemma* 

**DATE:** *February 21, 2025*

**SUBJECT:** *Testimony for February 26, 2025 “Combating the Opioid Epidemic” Hearing*

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Good afternoon, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gillibrand, and distinguished members of the Special Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the devastating crisis of overdoses and fentanyl poisonings. It is an honor to present a proven strategy from Florida—one that can be replicated in communities nationwide.

Chairman Scott, your leadership, starting with your time as Florida’s Governor when you and Attorney General Bondi took action to shut down pill mills, served as a model for the country. Senator Gillibrand, your efforts through legislation like the FEND Off Fentanyl Act have been crucial in this fight. I would also like to recognize Senator Moody, who, as Florida’s Attorney General, provided invaluable leadership in the fight against this epidemic. Your vision and dedication inspired my own focus on this issue, which requires both law enforcement and clinical understanding.

I serve as the elected Sheriff of Seminole County, Florida, located in the Orlando Metropolitan area. Seminole County is the fourth most densely populated county in Florida, and despite its affluence, we are not immune to the devastating effects of this crisis. Simply stated, this epidemic does not discriminate—it affects citizens from all backgrounds and demands comprehensive solutions.

In my nearly 33 years of law enforcement, I’ve come to believe that the greatest responsibility of a civilized society is to protect and preserve human life. Overdose deaths have tragically become the leading cause of death for individuals aged 18 to 45. In 2022, the average life expectancy in the United States decreased, partially due to the rise in overdoses.

To effectively combat this crisis, we need a holistic approach that includes prevention, treatment, advocacy for life-saving interventions, and a strong emphasis on a law enforcement strategy that aggressively goes after drug dealers who are dealing deadly doses of narcotics in our communities.

Prevention remains an incredibly powerful tool. Through focused education and awareness, we can equip individuals with the knowledge to avoid addiction before it starts. Prevention also

requires ensuring the highest levels of access to opioid antagonists, like Narcan, a life-saving medication that can immediately reverse opioid overdoses. In Florida, we've made great strides in expanding access to these antagonists, and they have saved countless lives.

Treatment is equally important in breaking the cycle of addiction. Medication-assisted therapy, combined with cognitive behavioral therapy, has proven effective in helping individuals recover from substance use disorder in both clinical and correctional settings.

Data collection also plays a critical role in combating this epidemic. We need to gather and analyze overdose data at all levels. By understanding overdose trends, we can better allocate resources and target enforcement efforts.

However, accountability for drug dealers is absolutely crucial if we are going to put an end to this epidemic. We must make sure that those who distribute fentanyl and other illicit substances, like the emerging trend of street-level Xylazine, are held fully responsible for their actions, whether there is an associated death or not. Too often, overdoses are treated as accidents when, in reality, they are crimes. In Florida, we've passed legislation with harsher penalties for drug dealers whose actions result in fatal overdoses, while at the same time, we have created laws that criminally charge dealers if an individual overdoses and is brought back to life with an opioid antagonist. Drug dealers cannot be let off easily, and the law must hold these individuals accountable to the fullest extent.

Additionally, we cannot ignore the illicit drug trade, particularly from cartels like the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation, which still pose a threat to our country. Securing the border and preventing fentanyl from entering our country is critical to minimizing its availability and reducing deaths.

This crisis must unite us all, regardless of partisan lines, because it impacts every community across the country.

In conclusion, we must adopt a holistic strategy that integrates prevention, treatment, improved data collection, and the strictest accountability for drug dealers. This strategy works, builds safer communities, and ultimately saves lives. Utilizing this strategy in Seminole County, we've achieved a 29% reduction in overdoses and a 42% reduction in fatalities in 2024. While we have seen a reduction, we know the hard work still lies ahead.

Thank you for having me here today. I look forward to addressing any questions you may have.