

# U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY

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CHAIRMAN Special Committee on Aging

## **Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement**

### ***“Understanding a Growing Crisis: Substance Use Trends Among Older Adults”***

The Senate Special Committee on Aging will come to order. Thanks to our witnesses for being here. Welcome to the Committee's eleventh hearing of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress about substance use disorder in older adults.

In the five years since the Committee held a hearing on this topic, we witnessed significant policy changes, but gaps in data and coverage remain. Although substance use disorders tend to be lower among older adults compared to other age groups, older adults are not immune to these issues, and this is an evolving and growing crisis in America. Recently, the National Survey of Drug Use and Health reported that nearly 4 million older adults had a substance use disorder in 2022. Of that, 1.8 million (of the 4 million) had a drug use disorder and 2.3 million (of the 4 million) had an alcohol use disorder.

Mortality from drug overdoses among people aged 65 and older has more than tripled, tripled between 2000 and 2020. Alcohol-related mortality among this population has also increased over the past several decades, including by more than 18 percent just between 2019 to 2020 alone. The number of older adults needing substance use disorder treatment as I mentioned has tripled from 1.7 million in 2000 to 5.7 million in 2020. One in four older adults experience mental health issues, which often co-occur with substance use disorders. Even with these data points, the knowledge base regarding older adults with substance use disorders is limited. There is less data, less research, and far fewer resources than for other populations.

Older adults tend to be overlooked for substance use disorders in typical screenings and prevention of efforts, even though they are more susceptible to developing substance use disorders than other age groups. And they are at higher risk of undiagnosed and untreated substance use disorders because of this lack of screening.

One of our witnesses today will tell us that the people, the problems, and the solutions remain largely invisible to our society. While strong strides have been made in recent years to expand coverage and access to substance use disorders treatment across payer systems, gaps still remain.

Another of our witnesses will highlight these gaps within the Medicare and Medicaid programs, and what we can do to ensure that older adults receive the treatment and recovery supports that they need. There are also significant barriers to accessing treatment, even if it is available and covered.

Stigma, Stigma strongly inhibits the ability to seek and receive care. Stigma about substance use disorders, stigma from society about older adults, stigma from family members, and stigma from medical providers themselves further confounds the ability of older adults to receive accurate and timely diagnoses and treatments for their substance use disorders. Another barrier is the lack of substance use disorder providers or treatment programs to serve the population generally, and even fewer who will serve older adults specifically.

As we'll hear today, the substance use disorder crisis affects different age groups, demographic groups, and regions of the country differently. We are seeing devastating rates of overdose deaths for young people due to the ongoing fentanyl crisis. For example, in my home state of Pennsylvania, we've seen overdose deaths linked to fentanyl in the eastern and western parts of the state but also in rural and in urban counties as well.

We need to do more to stop the flow of fentanyl into American communities. So, I'm fighting to pass the FEND Off Fentanyl Act, which will crack down on the chemical suppliers in China and the Mexican cartels that produce and bring fentanyl across the border. A family's tragedy, with regard to fentanyl, often begins with chemical companies in China, which ship these lethal substances, often referred to as precursor chemicals to Mexico where cartels produce fentanyl and traffic it to the U.S. This bill, the FEND Off Fentanyl Act, will make sure we get tougher on these criminal organizations, sanctioning them and cutting off their source of income.

Substance use disorders and the fentanyl crisis are complex topics that will not be fixed with one single solution, nor will we be able to cover every single facet of these topics at this hearing. But today, we intend to shine a light on these issues to gain a more comprehensive understanding of substance use disorder among older adults and look towards policy solutions that can address some of these issues.

So, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and now I turn to Ranking Member Braun for his opening statement.