



Chairman Rick Scott's Opening Statement "Combating the Opioid Epidemic"

"Over the last decade, we have lost hundreds of thousands of American lives to drug overdoses.

It's happening in every community, across every state. None of us have been spared from the carnage left by this crisis.

And we have all heard the heartbreaking stories of families who have lost children, parents and siblings to fentanyl and other opioids.

Fighting the opioid crisis has been an incredible challenge.

The precursors of these drugs come from Communist China and are bought by the evil drug cartels to make deadly opioids like fentanyl. These cartels then traffic these drugs over the border and into our communities where they poison and kill tens of thousands of Americans EVERY YEAR.

Thanks to the hard work of our governors, state attorneys general, law enforcement, advocates, Sheriff departments, police departments, from 2022 to 2023 we saw a drop in overdose deaths for people aged 15 to 54.

Now, that's good news – but it shows we have more work to do.

While overdose deaths in the U.S. dropped for people between the ages of 15 and 54 – we saw deaths INCREASE from 2022 to 2023 for Americans who are aged 55 and older after seeing an INCREASE in the 65 and older age group in 2022.

In 2023, more than 29,000 Americans aged 55 and older died from an opioid overdose.

That's 80 seniors dying from opioid overdoses EVERY SINGLE DAY.

Think about it this way...in the two hours we'll spend together in this hearing today, SIX people aged 55 and older will die.

Every overdose is preventable. Every single one of those nearly 30,000 lives of older Americans lost could have been saved.

While we have all heard the heart wrenching stories of the children and young people lost to the opioid crisis, the stories that have been largely untold are those about the devastating impact that this crisis is having on American seniors.

That includes not only the horrible deaths I just talked about, but also the toll of becoming a caretaker when parents are impacted by these drugs. I know that we will hear firsthand today about that from Ms. Mateer.

I believe the Aging Committee must take this issue on and that's why we are having this hearing today. This isn't a partisan issue; it's an American issue and Congress must act NOW.

Last year, I was proud to have my bipartisan END FENTANYL Act, signed into law, which fellow Aging Committee member, Senator Mark Kelly, cosponsored.

The END FENTANYL Act was a bipartisan success because it exposed just how behind parts of the federal government were when it comes to fighting the opioid epidemic and stopping the deadly fentanyl that is killing thousands of our fellow Americans.

In 2019, a study from the Government Accountability Office found that drug interdiction guidance at U.S. Customs and Border Protection had not been updated in 20 years.

That is clearly UNACCEPTABLE. Now that the END FENTANYL Act is law, CBP is required to update its policies at least once every three years to ensure operational field manuals, including their drug interdiction guidance, are up to date.

These are the kinds of commonsense policies we need to get done here in Washington.

Seeing the END FENTANYL Act become law makes me even more optimistic that we can get things done, and I have more ideas with bipartisan support to combat the opioid crisis.

Last week, I reintroduced my OPIOIDS Act with Senator Welch of Vermont. This bipartisan bill is one step we can take to fight this epidemic here and now.

It would provide better insight into overdose deaths nationwide.

Local law enforcement agencies are on the frontlines of this crisis, and this would provide additional grants to support for law enforcement in communities with high rates of overdoses.

It would make federal agencies collaborate on this problem.

And my OPIOIDS Act would stop the bad practice of stealing money from the National Drug Control Strategy and Budget through "automatic approvals" that aren't explicitly approved by the Office of National Drug Control Policy Director.

I am also proud to lead a bipartisan awareness resolution each year for the lifesaving drug, naloxone.

As our witnesses know all too well, naloxone literally stops an overdose in its tracks.

That is why each June 6th we do a National Naloxone Awareness Day resolution to raise awareness and educate people on the lifesaving capabilities of something so simple to carry.

In addition to those, I also have several other pieces of legislation on this issue including:

- *National Fentanyl Awareness Week Resolution;*
- *Overdose RADAR Act for better health data on overdoses; and*
- *SOCIAL MEDIA Act to combat illicit online sales of drugs.*

This is by no means all we can do, but we have to start somewhere.

Like I said earlier, I am optimistic. I know it may not seem like there is a clear path forward, but if we keep fighting every single day, I know we can make a change.

I look forward to hearing your testimony and working with my colleagues on next steps to fight this issue.

###