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House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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Opening Statement

Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly

House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

Subcommittee on Government Operations

Hearing on “Examining the Shipment of Illicit Drugs in International Mail”

September 7, 2017

Opioid abuse is one of the biggest public health threats we face as a nation—and the threat is growing at a frightening pace.

According to data released just a few days ago by the National Center for Health Statistics, more than 64,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2016. This figure is an increase of more than 20% over the number of drug overdose deaths in 2015.

These data also show that synthetic opioids, like fentanyl, now cause more deaths than any other type of drug. According to the Center for Health Statistics, deaths from synthetic opioids more than doubled from 2015 to 2016 to just over 20,000. A *New York Times* headline this weekend proclaimed that deaths from fentanyl have increased by 540% in just three years.

In my own state of Virginia, deaths from synthetic opioids rose from 263 to 692 from 2015 to 2016. And, sadly, Virginia was not alone among states in seeing deaths from opioids double or even triple in just the past year.

The Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis, headed by Governor Christie, recently warned that, “We are miserably losing this fight to prevent fentanyl from entering our country and killing our citizens.”

The Commission emphasized to President Trump that, “The first and most urgent recommendation of this Commission is direct and completely within your control. Declare a national emergency.” President Trump held a news conference in which he said the words, the “opioid crisis is an emergency.” But, he hasn’t fulfilled the promise in those words and provided or even asked for emergency funding relief to address this nationwide problem.

Among many other thoughtful recommendations, the Commission urged the U.S. government to “intercept fentanyl (and other synthetic opioids) in envelopes and packages at mail processing distribution centers.”

The federal agency responsible for preventing fentanyl from coming into the U.S. through international mail and express consignment packages like FedEx and UPS is Customs

and Border Protection. CBP is statutorily required to “ensure the interdiction of persons and goods illegally entering or exiting the United States.” CBP inspects inbound international mail received by the U.S. Postal Service. CBP also inspects inbound international express commerce packets at express consignment carriers’ hubs.

According to data provided by CBP to our staff prior to this hearing, the greatest increases in the rates of seizures of fentanyl have been in the mail and express consignment packages.

Right now, however, CBP does not appear to know if it is using the most effective tools to find fentanyl in international mail and packages.

The Government Accountability Office will warn us today that for one targeting method—the use of advanced data on mail and express shipments—CBP hasn’t done the analyses necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of this targeting method relative to other methods.

Equally troubling is that Customs may not be using all available data to target mail for inspection and investigation, may be targeting only a small number of packages per day, and may not even be targeting whole classes of mail.

In fact, using existing data already collected by the Postal Service, the Postal Service’s Inspector General recently linked a package intercepted by CBP that contained fentanyl to hundreds of additional packages that likely contained fentanyl but were apparently allowed to enter the United States. This could point to a potentially much bigger problem wherein the CBP is failing systematically to uncover these illicit shipping networks.

Given the urgent and growing threat that fentanyl and other synthetic opioids pose to our nation, as well as the recommendation of the Christie Commission to increase our ability to detect and interdict drugs inbound in international mail and express consignments “using enhanced technology, more manpower, and expanded canine deployment,” it is critical that we ascertain which methods of interdicting drugs in inbound mail and consignments are most effective.

One thing is clear, however, and that is that President Trump’s proposed wall won’t stop the most dangerous form of what is now the nation’s deadliest illegal drug from entering the country through the mail and UPS packages. Effective targeting methods implemented with adequate resources will.

I look forward to hearing from CBP on how it plans to address current deficiencies in its interdiction efforts and help turn the tide of the public health crisis.

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