

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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February 16, 2018

The Honorable Trey Gowdy
Chairman
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am writing to urge that our Committee request a briefing from the White House on the status of the Trump Administration's efforts to implement the recommendations of the President's Opioid Commission. I understand that President Trump has designated Kellyanne Conway as his point person on this issue, so her input would help the Committee with its ongoing efforts to evaluate the status of the Commission's recommendations.¹

Our work on the opioid crisis had been bipartisan, at least until recently.

For example, you graciously agreed to my request to hold a field hearing on this crisis on November 28, 2017. A total of 12 Members—8 Democrats and 4 Republicans—traveled to Baltimore to hear compelling testimony from Governor Chris Christie, who led the President's Commission. The Commission made more than 60 bipartisan recommendations in its interim and final reports, and these recommendations provide a detailed blueprint for tackling this crisis.²

During the hearing, Governor Christie testified about the urgency of the Commission's recommendations. He stated:

I am acutely aware as a Republican governor in the State of New Jersey that there is much that divides political dialogue in our country right now that makes it very difficult for us to get things done. This cannot be one of them.³

¹ See, e.g., *Conway to Lead White House Opioid Effort*, The Hill (Nov. 29, 2017) (online at <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/362477-conway-to-lead-white-house-opioid-effort>).

² The President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis, *Final Report* (Nov. 1, 2017) (online at www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/images/Final_Report_Draft_11-1-2017.pdf); The President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis, *Interim Report* (Mar. 29, 2017) (online at www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/ondcp/commission-interim-report.pdf).

³ House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Testimony of Governor Chris Christie, Chair,

I agree with Governor Christie, and I believe that leadership starts at the top. To continue this bipartisan effort, shortly after our hearing, I directed my staff to share with your staff a draft letter that we could send together to request a briefing from the White House.

I strongly believe that the Commission's recommendations have the best chance of being fully implemented if the White House works with federal agencies and Congress to organize a bipartisan effort that transcends traditional jurisdictional boundaries and recognizes the gravity of the crisis we face. Our Committee is ideally positioned to take on this role, and individuals at the White House are ideally positioned to update us on their progress.

Unfortunately, your staff responded that you were not willing to join any request to the White House seeking information. Instead, you sent your own briefing request on January 18, 2018, to the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). You sent your letter without consulting me or asking me to join. To be clear, I had no objection to obtaining a briefing from ONDCP, and in fact our staffs received this briefing on February 13, 2018.

One problem with speaking only with ONDCP is that President Trump and his top advisors have been trying to decimate ONDCP since the first days of his Administration. Last year, the Office of Management and Budget reportedly proposed slashing ONDCP's budget by 95% by completely eliminating its two major grant programs—the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas grant program and the Drug Free Communities Act grant program.⁴ And this year, President Trump's budget proposes a 95% reduction in ONDCP's budget, but would move these grant programs to the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services, respectively.⁵

Also troubling is the lack of interaction between Acting ONDCP Director Baum and White House officials. Despite the fact that Acting Director Baum reports directly to White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, the two reportedly have never held any substantive meetings since General Kelly was appointed.

In addition, the dearth of senior leadership at ONDCP negatively affects its ability to carry out its mission. A January 3, 2018, memo to ONDCP staff stated that "ONDCP leadership recognizes that we have lost a few talented staff members," and explained that the Deputy Chief of Staff would take over some functions of the Chief of Staff.⁶ As a result, a 24-year-old former

The President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis, *Hearing on "Combating the Opioid Crisis"* (Nov. 28, 2017).

⁴ *Trump Again Targets Drug Policy Office Proposing 95 Percent Budget Cut*, Politico (Jan. 18, 2018) (online at www.politico.com/story/2018/01/18/trump-targets-drug-policy-office-297422).

⁵ Office of Management and Budget, *Efficient, Effective, Accountable: An American Budget, Fiscal Year 2019* (Feb. 12, 2018) (online at www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/); Executive Office of the President, *Fiscal Year 2018: Congressional Budget Submission* (Feb. 2017) (online at www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/docs/EOP-FY18-Budget.pdf).

⁶ *Meet the 24-Year-Old Trump Campaign Worker Appointed to Help Lead the Government's Drug Policy Office*, Washington Post (Jan. 14, 2018) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/meet-the-24-year-old-trump-campaign-worker-appointed-to-help-lead-the-governments-drug-policy-office/2018/01/13/abdada34-f64e-

campaign worker with no experience in drug policy was allowed to hold a senior position for months.⁷ Finally, ONDCP still has no permanent director, and President Trump's new nominee, White House Deputy Chief of Staff James Carroll, has little drug policy experience.⁸

At this point, it seems obvious that the White House is the locus of decision-making on opioid policy—not ONDCP. If our Committee really wants to make a difference, we should work with the White House to fulfill all of the Commission's recommendations, which Governor Christie implored us to do. As Governor Christie testified at our hearing in November: "I hope that the members of Congress work with the President and hold the Administration and each other responsible for getting something done on this issue."⁹

For all of these reasons, I believe it is critical that we now hear directly from senior White House officials on their plan to implement the Commission's recommendations. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Member

11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html?utm_term=.b2d1646de6a7).

⁷ *Trump's 24-Year-Old Drug Policy Appointee to Step Down by Month's End*, Washington Post (Jan. 24, 2018) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/trumps-24-year-old-drug-policy-appointee-to-step-down-by-months-end/2018/01/24/77ce5656-0159-11e8-8acf-ad2991367d9d_story.html?utm_term=.38813ff8337d).

⁸ *Trump to Nominate Jim Carroll for 'Drug Czar,'* Politico (Feb. 9, 2018) (online at www.politico.com/story/2018/02/09/jim-carroll-drug-czar-trump-402080).

⁹ House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Testimony of Governor Chris Christie, Chair, The President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis, *Hearing on "Combating the Opioid Crisis"* (Nov. 28, 2017).