

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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### Opening Statement Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings

#### Hearing on “American’s Heroin and Opioid Abuse Epidemic” March 22, 2016

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding today’s hearing on America’s heroin and opioid epidemic. This is a national public health emergency, and we need to treat it like one. People are dying in Baltimore, Orlando, Salt Lake City, Manchester, and cities all across our country.

We can no longer ignore this public health emergency—Congress needs to put its money where its mouth is and actually help our states fund treatment programs to stop this epidemic in its tracks.

Drug treatment facilities without adequate funding are like firemen trying to put out a raging inferno without enough water.

Last week, Leader Pelosi sent a letter urging Speaker Ryan to schedule a vote on \$600 million in emergency funding to help states address this epidemic before we recess this week. Our colleague from Connecticut, Rep. Courtney, has already introduced this bill in the House, and Senator Shaheen has been pressing this legislation in the Senate. Congress should not leave town until we take emergency action to increase funding to help states combat this epidemic.

We must also fully fund President Obama’s budget request for \$1.1 billion for 2017. This crisis will not be ended in a day. It will take our sustained commitment, and every one of us owes it to our constituents to make that a priority. They want us to take action.

Let me tell you why federal funding is so important. In my hometown of Baltimore, I have witnessed with my own eyes the destruction drug addiction inflicts on our communities. I have seen vibrant neighborhoods and hardworking families destroyed.

In Baltimore—where many of the victims were poor and black—this went on for decades. Our nation treated this issue like a war rather than a public health emergency. We incarcerated a generation rather than giving them the treatment they needed.

Now, things are changing. Between 2006 and 2013, the number of first-time heroin users nearly doubled, and about 90% of these first-time users were white.

This epidemic has become a runaway train barreling through every family and every community in its path. It is now responsible for the deaths of 78 Americans every single day.

Why is this happening? In part, it is a result of doctors over-prescribing pain medication and drug companies urging them on so they can make massive profits. I would like to enter into the record an op-ed by Emily Narciso that appeared in the Baltimore Sun on March 19. As she explains, the United States has only 5% of the world's population, but we consume more than 80% of the world's painkillers.

So yes, I believe it was unconscionable that our nation ignored this issue for decades. But now, Republicans and Democrats are starting to work together. I thank God that this day has finally come and the stars are starting to align for meaningful change. We now have people like Orrin Hatch, Chris Christie, Rob Portman, Kelly Ayotte, and Mike Pence realizing the gravity of this crisis and supporting more funding to help our cities and states. They are beginning to realize that this is not an urban issue, a rural issue, a black issue, or a white issue—this is an American issue that affects your sisters, brothers, sons, and daughters.

There is something else we must do. We can no longer allow drug companies to keep ripping off the taxpayers for life-saving medications.

Cities all around the country have recognized the need to equip their first responders, police officers, and public health officials with naloxone—a drug that can reverse opioid overdoses in a matter of minutes.

But their efforts have been directly undermined by corporate greed. As more first responders began using this drug, the company that makes it, Amphastar, began increasing its prices by staggering amounts. In May 2014, a ten-dose pack cost the Baltimore City Health Department roughly \$190. Today, it costs more than \$400.

Despite repeated efforts by my home state of Maryland, this company continues to overcharge for this drug. The company also continues to obstruct congressional oversight by refusing to produce all of the documents I requested last May about their massive price increases.

Mr. Chairman, today's hearing is rightly focused on the heroin and opioid epidemic. But I hope the Committee will turn next to my request for documents, as well as my request for a hearing with executives from Amphastar.

With that, let me welcome our esteemed panel of witnesses today. Thank you for being here. In particular, I would like to welcome Dr. Leana Wen, the Baltimore City Health Commissioner. She is a true national leader in developing and carrying out effective solutions to the opioid crisis, we are very fortunate to have her here with us today.

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