

# 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 "Combating the Opioid Crisis" November 28, 2017

I want to begin by thanking Chairman Gowdy for calling today's very important hearing and for bringing the Oversight Committee to Baltimore.

I also thank my colleagues for coming to Baltimore. I have been in Congress for more than 20 years, and I have been to a lot of field hearings. But I have never seen this many Members attend a field hearing.

I believe today's remarkable turnout reflects the fact that the opioid crisis is truly a national emergency that does not discriminate based on politics. It affects red states and blue states, and every state in between. So I am extremely grateful that the Chairman agreed to my request to bring the Committee on the road to investigate the devastating effects of this scourge first-hand.

I also thank Dr. Miller and Johns Hopkins for the warm welcome we have received here. The work that you do makes a huge difference in our community and around the globe.

I also thank our esteemed guests, Governor Hogan and Mayor Pugh, for joining us. We are honored by your presence.

And, of course, I thank our witnesses, Governor Christie, Commissioner Wen, Dr. Alexander, and Mr. Baum. Thank you for testifying today and for all that you are doing to help us combat opioids and save lives.

A year and a half ago, at our Committee's first hearing on this issue, I warned that so many people were dying in communities across America that we could no longer ignore this emergency.

Today, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that more than 64,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2016—an increase of more than 20% over the year before.

To put this in perspective, the death toll from drug overdoses last year alone was higher than all U.S. military casualties in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars combined.

Every twenty minutes, someone dies from an opioid overdose. If today's hearing lasts just two hours, half a dozen families will have lost a parent, a sibling, or a child to opioids.

We have the reports. We have had years of talk. Now it's time for action. The American people are looking to us. They are looking to the President and Congress, and they are asking, what are you going to do?

Governor Christie and the other members of the President's Commission on Drug Addiction have given us a blueprint for action with dozens of recommendations.

Now, it's up to us—Republicans and Democrats, federal, state, and local officials, researchers, policy makers, doctors, drug companies, health providers on the ground, and families of the faith community. We need to work together to *end* this epidemic.

There are some things we can do right now to help prevent addiction and save those who already have this disease. For example, we can ensure that every single person who needs naloxone has it.

The Commission's report highlights the importance of equipping first responders with naloxone, including police officers, fire departments, and public health officials. But here's the challenge: drug companies have continued to hike the price of this 45-year-old drug, and communities have been forced to ration it.

In September, I led 50 Members of the House of Representatives in sending a letter urging President Donald Trump to negotiate lower prices for naloxone—just as the Commission recommended. Unfortunately, we never received a response. The President should act now to ensure that naloxone is available at reasonable prices whenever and wherever it is needed.

We also need to ensure that every affected person has access to effective treatment. According to the Commission, "Today, only 10.6% of youth and adults who need treatment for a substance use disorder receive that treatment." There is simply no way we will end this crisis if 90% of those affected are not being treated for it.

To do this, we need funding. Last month, President Trump declared this epidemic a public health emergency, but he did not propose any additional funding to combat it. We cannot fight this epidemic without funds equal to the challenge we face. This is the sad, but stark truth.

Finally, we must recognize and acknowledge the many factors that put people at risk: woefully inadequate support for our children and our most vulnerable residents, worsening economic inequality, lack of opportunity, and profound disparities in the criminal justice system. We cannot solve this crisis until these risk factors are addressed.

With that, I thank Chairman Gowdy again for convening this critical hearing today, and I look forward to the testimony of our esteemed witnesses.

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