

Testimony Before the United States Senate Committee on Finance

Subcommittee on Health Care Finance

“An Examination of Efforts by Medicare and Medicaid to Reduce Opioid Overutilization and
Misuse”

District Attorney Matt Weintraub, Bucks County, Pennsylvania

Good afternoon, thank you Senator Toomey, for the opportunity to provide testimony to this committee. As Bucks County District Attorney, I will try to focus my remarks on the challenges of the opioid epidemic as I see them, with a specific focus on why prevention is so important.

Bucks County is particularly challenged in its battle against the opioid epidemic due to our proximity to Philadelphia (Kensington specifically), Allentown, and Trenton which makes it easy for those suffering from addiction to obtain drugs. We strive to prevent heroin and other drugs from infiltrating our county, but they are easy to obtain with a short drive. That is why a regional or national response is vital. No one county or entity within the county can do it alone. We in Bucks County do work well as a team across systems such as law enforcement and health and human services, but we do need more help. The following is a great example of a case where cross-county collaboration thwarted a pill-dealing drug ring. In 2018, members of the Bucks County Drug Strike Force conducted an investigation in which ten people were arrested in Berks County for making and passing fraudulent prescriptions. Over 106 fraudulent prescriptions were filled in the Bucks County/Philadelphia area which resulted in these individuals obtaining 12,500 Oxycodone pills. These pills were then distributed on the street in Bucks County and Philadelphia.

Victims of this epidemic not only include the users themselves, but the emotional, and often criminal, toll taken on family and loved ones. Additionally, in 2017 we had 217 babies born diagnosed with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). These innocent newborns are a startling reminder that the opioid epidemic does not only affect those who are addicted.

Our medication take-back program demonstrates the overprescribing problem we face as illustrated by the amount of unneeded medication in our community. In a good news, bad news scenario, we are the #1 county in the state in medication take back, having collected over 100,000 pounds of unused, old, or expired medication since this program's inception. That is a lot of medication that can no longer be diverted to hurt or kill someone ever again. But, that is a lot of unnecessary medication, period. Medicare and Medicaid are two of the largest payers for prescription opioids and therefore hold a critical role in making sure we reduce the amount of excess opioids in circulation in the first place.

Congress has recently dedicated an unprecedented \$4.6 billion to combat the opioid crisis in fiscal year 2018, and it is important to make sure that funding reaches the places where it is needed most through the programs that will be most effective. Such programs that could benefit

from such funding in Bucks County include drug recovery programs in jails that can educate and successfully begin to treat our inmates so that they never return. Another innovative program we are looking to expand is the Bucks Police Aiding in Recovery, modeled off of a similar effort by the Bensalem Police Department, which helps increase treatment access to those who seek it voluntarily.

While Medicaid and Medicare may have responded slowly to implement controls aimed at curbing overutilization of opioids in the first place, the Behavioral Health (drug/alcohol treatment) Medicaid providers have been strong partners in providing treatment supports. Unfortunately, part of the challenge we face is that no one wants these providers to open up facilities or increase services in their community. We must combat this community stigma against those with substance use disorders, and we need our elected officials to be leaders in this effort.

Those in recovery cannot be looked at as needing only treatment supports. Physical health, housing, nutrition, employment and other social determinants of health need to be addressed to help people in recovery. That is another part of the challenge that all single county authorities must strive to address. Finally, we have spent so much time focused on heroin, that we have turned our attention away from other substances. Our current concern is a “twin epidemic” which pairs stimulants (ie methamphetamine) and opiates (ie oxy or heroin). We are now finding that many opioid abusers are also abusing meth in order to ease their painful physical withdrawal symptoms experienced as they seek their next opioid fix. We must also continue to focus on underage drinking and marijuana use which continue to be issues for our communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today to talk about the challenges of the opioid epidemic as I see them, with a specific focus on why prevention is so important in this battle against the opioid epidemic.