

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee,
Hearing on “Attacking America’s Epidemic of Heroin and Prescription Drug Abuse”
January 27, 2016**

Local communities throughout the nation – both urban and rural – are grappling with the tragic effects of the epidemic of heroin and prescription opioid abuse. We have all seen the statistics showing the dramatic rise in overdose deaths particularly among young people. The stories behind these numbers shed light on the human impact of this epidemic: families trying to find and afford treatment for a loved one hooked on painkillers; children neglected or left behind by an addicted parent; victims of crime fueled by addiction; and law enforcement and community officials overwhelmed by the flood of opioids and cheap heroin.

So it is not a question of *whether* there is a heroin and opioid epidemic; the question is what do we do about it?

Like many other states, Vermont has not been immune to the scourge of opioid and heroin abuse. But in true Vermont fashion, we have rallied together to tackle the problem head on through community-based and comprehensive strategies. Seeing the success of this direct and cooperative strategy makes me proud to be a Vermonter.

We heard testimony about a number of these innovative approaches during a series of field hearings I convened in Vermont over the past several years. In Rutland, Project VISION brings together city officials, law enforcement, and residents to work collaboratively to remove the stigma of addiction, and to confront the problems of drug abuse and related crime. The Boys and Girls Clubs throughout Vermont are working with schools and public health officials to help children affected by the epidemic and to prevent them from getting swept up in that world.

In all of my conversations with Vermonters, one thing is clear: We cannot arrest or jail our way out of this problem. We have lost the war on drugs because we relied primarily on unnecessarily harsh sentencing laws. We must not repeat these mistakes of the past. If we want to find lasting solutions to these problems, we need to identify and support effective prevention, treatment, and recovery programs.

We need to devote more resources to combat this epidemic – and not just pay lip service to the needs of our communities. After the field hearing I convened in Rutland, I advocated for a new Federal grant program to fund expanded treatment options for heroin and opioid abuse. I worked to get more Federal funding to law enforcement to go after the drug traffickers. In Vermont, we have seen a 65 percent increase in the number of Vermonters getting treatment for their addiction over the past two years. This is great progress, yet we know that on any given day, there are hundreds more who find themselves on waiting lists, while other patients in rural corners of my state travel hours just to get their medication. We need to do more.

I am proud to cosponsor Senator Shaheen’s emergency supplemental appropriations bill to fund additional public health outreach, treatment, recovery, and law enforcement efforts. I am also

proud to cosponsor the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, and I hope that this Committee will report that bill soon.

I welcome all the witnesses to this hearing today. I want to acknowledge in particular the Governor of Vermont, Peter Shumlin. He has been a local and national leader on this issue, and I have greatly appreciated his partnership in addressing this epidemic affecting so many of our fellow Vermonters.

I thank Senator Grassley for convening this hearing on such an important topic that affects so many communities. It is urgent that we find comprehensive and enduring solutions, and that the Federal government do its part to provide the resources and support necessary to sustain those efforts. We must act with purpose, and we must act now.

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