

Statement of the Honorable Peter Shumlin, Governor of Vermont
U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
“Attacking America’s Epidemic of Heroin
And Prescription Drug Abuse”

January 27, 2016

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Leahy, and distinguished Members of the Committee: thank you for holding this hearing. The opiate epidemic is a national crisis, and I know that this Committee plays a crucial role at the intersection of drug policy and the criminal justice system. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you today some of the experiences and lessons learned in my home state of Vermont.

I am proud of the innovative approaches we have taken in Vermont. Following my State of the State speech in 2014, I brought representatives together at the Statehouse from communities across the state to hear firsthand how the opiate epidemic was affecting our families. We heard from people in recovery, parents, police officers and health professionals, business people, teachers and others – all sharing how they are touched by addiction, and all committed to the effort to combat substance abuse in Vermont. Teams went home with action plans containing steps they would take to address the problems in a comprehensive way.

Recognizing the risk to children when their parent struggles with addiction, for example, our Department for Children and Families established a contract with a local treatment program to provide in home substance abuse screening for families during the child welfare investigation. If indicated, the parent receives an immediate referral to treatment so that they can get help to start addressing their addiction. Since we are seeing approximately 80% of new child welfare families struggling with addiction, this program aims to remove a substantial barrier to connecting them to treatment.

Our state legislature also made a change in the way we manage people who are arrested because they are feeding an addiction through petty crimes: they are being offered an assessment to go to treatment – not to jail -- so that they can receive help to end their opiate use. Our pre-trial services program allows States Attorneys in every county to partner with treatment programs to offer people help, if their criminal activity is fueled by addiction.

In the two years since I first tackled this crisis in my State of the State Address to the Vermont Legislature, we have expanded treatment by 65 percent, moved addicts into recovery instead of jail, and prevented hundreds of overdose deaths with rescue kits given to anyone who will take them.

Most importantly, we’ve removed the stigma that discriminates against our friends and family members struggling so hard against this terrible disease.

Federal funding assistance has been invaluable in our efforts. We are using funds from the SAMHSA Regional Prevention Partnership grant to support our work in this area. We also recently received a SAMHSA MAT (medication assisted treatment) grant that is helping us bring down our waiting list for high risk populations – people leaving prison and families involved with the child welfare system. With those Federal funds we will be able to reach 350 more patients with long-term treatment over the next three years.

I also want to thank everyone gathered here today for your commitment to this fight. In particular, I would like to thank Senator Leahy for his leadership on this issue. He was instrumental in crafting the SAMHSA MAT grant that is proving to be so important, and I know that he is deeply committed to providing support to the Federal, state, and local law enforcement officials who are tackling the opiate epidemic in rural communities like Vermont. And I also agree with Senator Leahy that more still needs to be done.

That is why I support the Opioid and Heroin Epidemic Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act, which will give Governors \$600 million in emergency funding for law enforcement, prevention and treatment programs, and public health programs that will help us continue important work like what we have started in Vermont.

I also hope Congress will give strong support to one of the items in the Supplemental Appropriations Act. The Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant would provide \$225 million in additional funds to distribute to states for programs related to prevention, treatment, recovery support and other services. For many states, this is the primary source of federal programs to address the misuse of alcohol and drugs. (In particular, we support additional funds in the SAPT Block Grant. This is the foundational money from SAMHSA that supports our state prevention and treatment resources.)

In addition, I hope you will support the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, which will help Vermont expand prevention and educational efforts—particularly aimed at teens, parents and other caretakers, and aging populations; expand the availability of naloxone, increase Vermonters' ability to dispose of unused medications; and strengthen prescription drug monitoring programs, which Vermont is expanding in coordination with our regional neighbors to prevent pill-shopping across borders.

All of these are things that we support and could benefit from.

It's about time that Congress passes meaningful and comprehensive legislation to address the pervasive damage that opiates are causing in our communities.

Thank you, and I would be pleased to answer any questions.