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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6200

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June 15, 2016

Chuck Rosenberg
Acting Administrator
Drug Enforcement Administration
8701 Morrisette Drive
Springfield, VA 22152

Dear Administrator Rosenberg:

Illicitly produced fentanyl has rapidly joined heroin as a deadly follow-on to the prescription opioid epidemic in the United States.

I am writing to request information regarding the breadth of the current surge in fentanyl-related overdoses and deaths that have been noted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹ The CDC attributed this jump to the increased availability of illicit fentanyl sold in pill or powder form, which differs from “pharmaceutical” fentanyl that is prescribed by doctors, oftentimes to late stage cancer patients, in patches or lozenges.²

I have grown concerned about the potential for fentanyl abuse to spread to Oregon and other western states, after an outbreak of overdoses in several northern California communities.³ Until now, fentanyl overdoses most often have been associated with states in the Midwest and New England, where, for example, Maine reported fentanyl-related deaths increasing 867% between 2013 and 2015.⁴ In 2015, more than 330 people died from fentanyl overdoses in Massachusetts.⁵

Opioid addiction and treatment are also of great importance to agencies within the jurisdiction of the Senate Committee on Finance, such as Medicaid, Medicare, and U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP). By 2020, public and private spending on substance abuse disorder treatment is expected to reach \$42.1 billion, compared to \$24.3 billion in 2009.⁶ Medicare and Medicaid are

¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Increases in Fentanyl Drug Confiscations and Fentanyl-related Overdose Fatalities*, Health Advisory Network, CDCHAN-00384, October 26, 2015, <http://emergency.cdc.gov/han/han00384.asp>.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Increases in Drug and Opioid Overdose Deaths — United States, 2000–2014*, MMWR: Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, January 1, 2016; 64(50):1378-82, <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6450a3.htm>.

³ Erin Allday, “Overdose Deaths Linked to Pills Containing Fentanyl,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 2, 2016, <http://www.sfchronicle.com/health/article/Overdose-deaths-linked-to-pills-containing-7224779.php>.

⁴ Katharine Q. Seelye, “Heroin Epidemic is Yielding to a Deadlier Cousin: Fentanyl,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/26/us/heroin-fentanyl.html>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, *Projections of National Expenditures for Treatment of Mental and Substance Use Disorders, 2010-2020*, SMA-14-4883, 2014, <http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA14-4883/SMA14-4883.pdf> <http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA14-4883/SMA14-4883.pdf>, 30-31.

expected to account for a third of this spending.⁷ I also have requested that one of DEA's partners, CBP, provide information regarding its efforts to stem the flow of illicit fentanyl into the country.

Last year, the DEA released an unclassified version of the National Heroin Threat Assessment Summary.⁸ This assessment has been helpful in better understanding the nexus between the over-prescription of opioid painkillers, the sale of heroin, and the growing threat of illicit fentanyl. Given the concern about the increasingly common use of illicit fentanyl, Congress, law enforcement officials, the press and the public, would benefit if DEA developed a similarly comprehensive compilation of information about illicit fentanyl.

I encourage your agency to consider developing such a publication that examines the different facets of the illicit fentanyl trade, and its dangers. If such a document already exists, please provide it to me. Please also work with my office to ensure that such a document is widely disseminated to the public.

If you or your staff have any questions, or need assistance in regards to this matter, please contact Peter Gartrell (peter_gartrell@finance.senate.gov) on my staff.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
Ranking Member

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, *National Heroin Threat Assessment Summary*, DEA-DCT-DIR-039-15, April 2015, https://www.dea.gov/divisions/hq/2015/hq052215_National_Heroin_Threat_Assessment_Summary.pdf.