

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 7, 2019

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

We write regarding the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's preliminary data on the decline in opioid related deaths in 2018.¹ Although this data may signal a positive trend in the ongoing opioid overdose crisis, the data also raises a number of questions about our progress in ending it and your Department's efforts to implement section 7023 of the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act (PL 115-271).

Overprescribing of prescription opioids in the late 1990's largely fueled the spike in opioid addiction and overdoses that continues to grip this country. In 2017, more than 47,000 Americans lost their lives to an opioid overdose. Of the opioid-related deaths, prescription opioids accounted for 17,000 deaths and synthetic illicit opioids, largely fentanyl, claimed the lives of nearly 29,000 people.² According to some reports, the perceived decline in opioid overdose deaths in 2018 can be attributed to new restrictions on opioid prescribing.³

We continue to hear anecdotally from individuals and communities in Massachusetts and New Hampshire that while opioid overdose fatalities may be declining, non-fatal overdoses are not — a turn of events that may be attributable to greater awareness and wider availability of the opioid antagonist naloxone, commonly referred to as Narcan. It is also unclear whether more individuals are being treated and entering recovery for opioid use disorders. Studies show that individuals who experience a nonfatal opioid overdose have a 24 times higher risk of death in the 12 months following that overdose, make comprehensive treatment services critical.⁴ More

¹ National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>.

² <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>.

³ [Abby Goodnough, Josh Katz & Margot Sanger-Katz, Drug Overdose Deaths Drop in U.S. for First Time Since 1990](#), N.Y. Times (July 17, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/07/17/upshot/drug-overdose-deaths-fall.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>.

⁴ Sarah G. Mars, Daniel Rosenblum & Daniel Ciccarone, *Illicit fentanyl in the opioid street market: desired or imposed?*, *Addiction* (Dec. 4, 2018), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/add.14474>.

information about the extent of naloxone use and treatment and recovery numbers would help us understand whether we are actually turning a corner on this crisis.

We need to stay focused on tracking all relevant trends related to the opioid overdose crisis, not just overdose fatalities, to gain a clearer picture of where we are as a country in ending this epidemic. This additional information will help the federal government and states identify interventions that are working and those that are not, as well as recognizing areas to which we need to divert resources to improve health outcomes for individuals impacted by the epidemic.

Last year, we introduced the National Milestones to Measure Progress in Ending the Opioid Epidemic Act of 2018, which became section 7023 of PL 115-271 when signed into law on October 24, 2018. This section requires the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to establish national metrics, within 180 days, to help measure success in curtailing the opioid crisis. Collectively, these indicators should help provide a comprehensive and thorough understanding of whether and how the opioid crisis is ending and identify areas in need of continued investment.

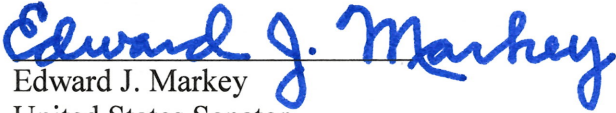
To better understand the Department's progress in implementing this section, please respond, by August 30, 2019, to the following questions:


- 1) As required by law with the enactment of PL 115-271, the Secretary of Health and Human Services has 180 days to develop or identify existing national indicators, to measure our response to the opioid crisis. Inasmuch as this 180-day period has passed, please identify at least 10 national indicators that are being used to measure progress in addressing the opioid crisis.
- 2) For each of the 10 indicators, what is HHS's stated goal or metric and annual targets, as the law requires HHS to develop?
- 3) What barriers, if any, has HHS faced in identifying both the indicators and metrics to be used to measure the progress of our public health response to the opioid crisis?
- 4) To date, what data do we have related to the following metrics outlined in the law:
 - a. the number of non-fatal overdoses;
 - b. the number of emergency room visits related to opioid misuse and abuse;
 - c. the number of individuals in sustained recovery from opioid use disorder;
 - d. the number of infections associated with illicit drug use;
 - e. the number of providers and the settings in which providers are using medication assisted treatment for opioid use disorders; and
 - f. the number of individuals in treatment for opioid use disorder.
- 5) What are the current treatment statistics and trends for individuals who have suffered a nonfatal overdose? How are these numbers helping to guide resource decisions in the effort to end the crisis?

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Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please contact Carlos Williams with Senator Markey at 202-224-2742 and Ian Hunter with Senator Hassan at 202-224-3324.

Sincerely,


Edward J. Markey
United States Senator


Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator