

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 18, 2018

President Donald Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Trump,

We write to express concern about your disappointing response to the ongoing epidemic of opioid abuse, addiction, and deaths. Since taking office one year ago, you have taken little substantive action to provide relief to communities and families still suffering from this crisis that claimed 42,000 lives last year.¹ The time to act is now. This public health crisis is too important for your administration to continually over-promise and under-deliver.

We welcomed your decision in October to declare a public health emergency, and we appreciated the additional opportunity to shed light on this devastating crisis. While your declaration held the potential to help communities respond to the epidemic by expanding our nation's addiction treatment workforce and increasing access to treatment through telemedicine, this assistance has yet to materialize.² Unfortunately, the emergency declaration expires in just a number of days on January 23, and the communities ravaged by the opioid crisis have not seen improvements attributable to your declaration. Your administration is squandering this critical opportunity to make good on its promises to expand treatment and make real progress addressing this crisis.

Your administration has neglected basic actions to help mitigate the opioid crisis. Most astoundingly, your administration has not provided Congress with any funding request to invest in states and families struggling to address the opioid epidemic. Your Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis provided you an extensive list of administrative policy recommendations that could help shift the tide of the opioid overdose crisis. To achieve any of these, however, communities and advocates on the frontlines need robust funding. It will be impossible to “liberate our communities from this scourge of drug addiction,”³ as you stated in your emergency declaration, without substantial, dedicated resources to address the opioid epidemic through education, prevention, surveillance, treatment, and recovery. It is imperative

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data on Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db294_table.pdf#page=4

² Ehley, Brianna. “Nothing is actually being done”: Trump's opioid emergency order disappoints. *Politico*. 1 Jan. 2018, <https://www.politicopro.com/ehealth/article/2018/01/nothing-is-actually-being-done-trumps-opioid-emergency-order-disappoints-271420>

³ Remarks by President Trump on Combatting Drug Demand and the Opioid Crisis. 26 Oct. 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-combatting-drug-demand-opioid-crisis/>

that the fiscal year 2019 budget include funding for a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach to addressing the opioid crisis, including funding for the policies recommended by the Opioid Commission.

Your Opioid Commission provided you with 56 recommendations, most of which do not need Congressional approval to implement – including streamlining federal opioid-related grant funding to states, creating a multi-platform media campaign on opioid use prevention, and enhancing data collection, quality metrics, and payment policies, to name a few – to improve our national response to this crisis. Now is the time to act on your Commission’s recommendations. Should congressional authorization be necessary, we stand ready to work with you to provide that support.

The fight against opioid addiction requires focused, professional leadership. The failure to fill positions integral to coordinating and executing our national response undermines this fight. The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) remains without a permanent head, even though it has been more than three months since Congressman Tom Marino withdrew his name from consideration in October 2017. Media reports also indicate that the acting chief of staff and general counsel for ONDCP, Lawrence Muir, was abruptly dismissed from his position in late December 2017. Some of the duties of the chief of staff and general counsel have been absorbed by Taylor Weyeneth, the current deputy chief of staff and the top political appointee in the office. However, reports have pointed out how remarkably inexperienced and unqualified the 24 year-old Mr. Weyeneth is to run the multibillion dollar anti-drug initiatives coordinated through ONDCP.⁴ The lack of staffing and leadership in this key agency is unacceptable.

The future of the ONDCP has been tenuous since your administration proposed slashing the office’s budget by 95 percent last year. Though you reversed your position on these proposed cuts, vacancies in the leadership of this office remain a concern. You should immediately fill the ONDCP director and chief of staff positions with qualified public health leaders who can direct national drug policy and facilitate interagency initiatives to address the opioid epidemic. A source within ONDCP recently stated, “[the administration is] either shutting us down or reducing us to atrophy, where we amount to zero,”⁵ speaking to the wasted potential of this office in coordinating our federal strategy on addiction. Since November 2017, Kellyanne Conway, a political operative with no prior experience in public health, has reportedly led the White House’s efforts against the drug overdose epidemic. She has made deplorable references

⁴ O’Harrow Jr, Robert. “Meet the 24-year-old Trump campaign worker appointed to help lead the government’s drug policy office.” Washington Post. 14 Jan. 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/meet-the-24-year-old-trump-campaign-worker-appointed-to-help-lead-the-governments-drug-policy-office/2018/01/13/abdada34-f64e-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html?utm_term=.0d6ba03f4ee5

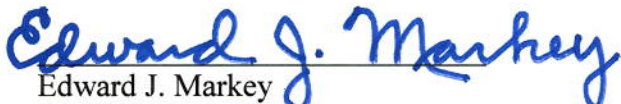
⁵ Acosta, Jim and Saba Hamedy. “Acting chief of staff and general counsel for drug czar suddenly dismissed.” CNN, 20 Dec. 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/12/20/politics/lawrence-muir-office-of-national-drug-control-policy-dismissed/index.htm>

to those suffering with substance use disorders,⁶ and the extent of her duties and responsibilities continues to be an open question.

The inability to appoint qualified experts to key drug policy positions exhibits a lack of purpose in mitigating the opioid epidemic, or worse, a lack of commitment. Our nation, struggling with the worst overdose crisis it has faced to date, deserves better.

You have pledged that, “we will overcome addiction in America.”³ We stand ready to help you achieve that goal. Just as we did with the INTERDICTION Act, which you recently signed into law, we will continue to work with our colleagues in Congress to equip states and communities in the throes of the opioid crisis with the resources and supports they need. We urge you to join us in this effort.

Sincerely,


Edward J. Markey
United States Senator


Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator


Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator


Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator


Bill Nelson
United States Senator


Jack Reed
United States Senator


Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator

⁶ On the June 25, 2017 edition ABC News’ “This Week with George Stephanopoulos” that funding hasn’t solved the problem of the opioid crisis, and that, “It takes money and it also takes a four letter word called will.”
<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/week-transcript-25-17-kellyanne-conway-sen-chuck/story?id=48254926>