

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 12, 2024

Aine Ramirez
Director
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
INTERDICT Science Center
22001 Loudoun County Parkway
Ashburn, VA 20598-1253

Dear Director Ramirez,

In 2017, in response to the crisis of illicit fentanyl trafficking, Congress passed our bill, the *International Narcotics Trafficking Emergency Response by Detecting Incoming Contraband with Technology (INTERDICT) Act*, which authorized funding for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to acquire additional chemical screening devices and dedicate more scientific personnel to interpret the data collected by those devices. Since the enactment of the *INTERDICT Act*, we have led appropriations efforts in Congress that have resulted in more than \$100 million in funding for non-intrusive inspection technology, including helping the Department of Homeland Security establish the eponymous INTERDICT Science Center to support efforts to prevent, detect, and interdict the unlawful importation of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids, narcotics, and psychoactive substances into the United States. We now write to request information on the INTERDICT Science Center's operations and needs going forward to help it fulfill its mission.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2023, synthetic opioids, primarily fentanyl, were responsible for almost 75,000 deaths in the United States.¹ Most illicit fentanyl is manufactured in clandestine drug-cartel laboratories in Mexico, from precursor chemicals originating in China.² Finished product fentanyl, often in the form of counterfeit pills, is then smuggled into the United States, primarily across the southwestern border and ports of entry.³

Various aspects of illicit fentanyl and its trafficking into the United States make continued cutting-edge scientific research imperative to bolster our interdiction efforts. For example, illicit fentanyl's high potency means that very small amounts pose a risk of overdose or death; just two milligrams of fentanyl, equivalent to 10 to 15 grains of table salt, is considered a fatal dose.⁴ Research into how to better identify and interdict substances containing the drug is therefore

¹ Press Release, U.S. Overdose Deaths Decrease in 2023, First Time Since 2018, CDC National Center for Health Statistics (May 15, 2024), https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2024/20240515.htm.

² National Drug Threat Assessment for 2024, U.S. Drug Enforcement Admin. (2024), <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/5.23.2024%20NDA-updated.pdf>.

³ Liana W. Rosen, *Illicit Fentanyl and Mexico's Role*, In Focus, Congressional Research Service (updated Mar. 22, 2024), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10400>.

⁴ Press Release, DEA Warns of Brightly-Colored Fentanyl Used to Target Young Americans, U.S. Drug Enforcement Admin. (Aug. 30, 2022), <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2022/08/30/dea-warns-brightly-colored-fentanyl-used-target-young-americans>.

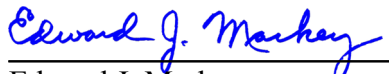
crucial to the safety and protection of all those who come into contact with it — from the law enforcement officers who inspect and seize contraband at our borders, to the public health officials responding to the rise of illicit substances in their communities. Research that the INTERDICT Science Center performs identifying fentanyl and its analogues could also help lead to new opioid antagonists to treat opioid overdoses.

To help us better understand the current work of the INTERDICT Science Center and its needs, please provide written responses to the following questions by August 28, 2024:

1. What are the current priorities and strategic objectives of the INTERDICT Science Center in advancing detection technologies for synthetic opioids and other emerging substances?
2. What specific challenges does the INTERDICT Science Center face in staying ahead of evolving tactics used by drug traffickers, and how can Congress assist in overcoming these challenges?
3. What specific funding needs does the INTERDICT Science Center have that, if met, would significantly enhance its research capabilities and operational effectiveness? Are there specific technology or infrastructure investments that would most benefit the INTERDICT Science Center?
4. Beyond funding, how can Congress better facilitate your mission and address current operational challenges?
5. How can Congress encourage and support more effective collaboration between the INTERDICT Science Center and other federal, state, and local agencies, as well as international partners?
6. How can Congress help raise awareness of the INTERDICT Science Center's work and its importance to combatting fentanyl trafficking?

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,


Edward J. Markey
United States Senator


Sherrod Brown
United States Senator