

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 18, 2017

Mr. Richard Baum
Acting Director
Office of National Drug Control Policy
Executive Office of the President
Washington, D.C. 20503

Dear Acting Director Baum:

As the office tasked with administrating the President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis, we urge you to consider important initiatives that could help deliver faster relief to millions of Americans. As the Commission is taking steps to address drug addiction, we are concerned that essential components, such as action on already existing recommendations, are being delayed. As such, we urge you to include action steps that can be immediately implemented.

For far too long, opioids have ravaged communities nationwide. Fatal drug overdoses are now the leading cause of death for Americans under 50. Death rates from the drug and opioid epidemic now rival those of HIV/AIDS during the 1990s, with overdoses killing more than 50,000 people a year. In the last year alone, nearly 60,000 Americans died of drug overdoses – the largest annual increase in deaths ever recorded. At this point, it is clear that the epidemic has become a national public health emergency.

In spite of these tragic statistics, the Administration is choosing to offer more talk, and less action. We know that law enforcement alone cannot deter addiction. The fact of the matter is that addiction, like any other chronic condition, is a disease that requires multi-faceted treatment. Former Surgeon General (SG) Vivek Murthy outlined recommendations for providing such multi-faceted treatment for Americans struggling with opioid use disorder in, "Facing Addiction in America." This report, released in November 2016, was the first-ever Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health, and was a milestone achievement to advance a broader, federal level effort to address the opioid epidemic.

Despite this landmark report, which helped establish the scientific evidence of the opioid epidemic, the Administration appears to be turning its back on these findings and continues to take steps that ignore the nation's growing drug addiction and opioid problem. In supporting a health care policy that would strip health care from millions, the Administration will eliminate coverage for millions of Americans with substance use disorders (SUDs) who now have access to medication and treatment. This comes on the heels of the Administration's recent budget proposal, which proposes cutting nearly \$400 million in funding for drug and mental health programs under the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Finally, during his opioid epidemic "listening tour" across the nation, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Tom Price, voiced skepticism about the

value of medication-assisted treatment (MAT) in effectively managing opioid use disorders. Rather, he vouched for methods that would “cure” people of their opioid addiction. Such rhetoric is archaic and out of line with the well-accepted fact that opioid addiction may require life-long management as a chronic condition.

At the same time that the White House is pushing these devastating cuts, the Department of Justice has chosen to ignore the fact that addiction is a public health disease, choosing instead to treat it solely as a criminal justice issue. This approach fails to take into account the realities of addiction and the need to treat the disease rather than punish the individual. History teaches us that a punitive one-size fits all approach is ineffective. Instead of wasting limited resources on seeking punitive measures for low-level offenders, we should concentrate our efforts on the kingpins who are responsible for putting this poison out on the streets.

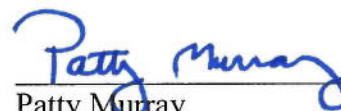
It is well past time we treat SUDs as a public health emergency. This means ending the attack on access to health care, providing necessary resources to initiatives, and grounding our efforts in hard evidence that will expand access to proven methods such as MAT. According to the report issued by SG Murthy, these treatments meet the highest standard of clinical evidence for safety and efficacy. It also means strengthening community-based prevention programs designed to stop drug use before it starts, and harm reduction programs, which are proven to reduce stigma and decrease the risks associated with SUDs. Furthermore, it includes supporting the resources and staff necessary to carry out the 21st Century Cures and the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Acts (CARA), two laws recently passed by Congress to help ensure strong investments in research, recovery and appropriate intervention measures. We urge the Commission to use these existing solutions as a starting point for taking immediate action to address the opioid crisis.

We must act now. For the millions of Americans currently suffering from addiction or abuse, another day could be a matter of life or death. They cannot afford to wait for the Commission to finish, yet another report, before action is taken. We stand ready to work with our Republican colleagues here in Congress on productive solutions that could provide immediate relief. The American people need coordinated action and investment in proven solutions now.

Sincerely,



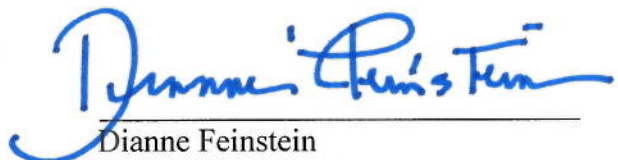
Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



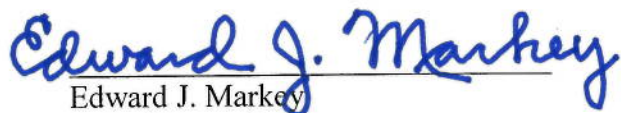
Patty Murray
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



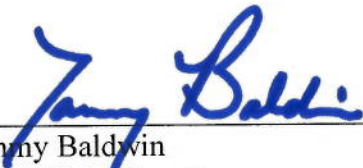
Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



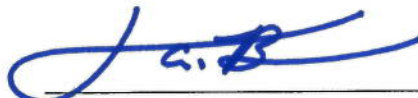
Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



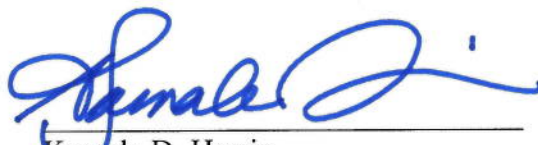
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



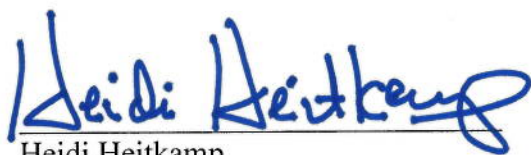
Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



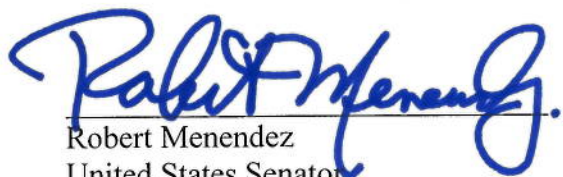
Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator



Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senator




Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator




Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

CC:
Governor Christie
Chairman, President's Commission on Combatting Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis