

Statement of Senator Tom Udall
Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control
Hearing on Heroin and Prescription Drug Abuse
May 14, 2014

Good Afternoon. First, I want to thank Chairman Feinstein and Co-Chairman Grassley for today's hearing. Thank you for your commitment to focusing attention on prescription drug abuse. This is an important issue and is of great concern in my state.

New Mexico has among the highest rates of drug overdose deaths in the country. That is not a distinction any of us wants. It is tragic, and it is unacceptable.

Today, drug addiction often begins in our medicine cabinets, rather than on the streets. But, whether illicit drugs or prescription drugs—the outcome of abuse is the same. Destroyed lives, devastated families, and unnecessary deaths. And it reaches every racial, geographical, and socio-economic group.

More New Mexicans overdose and die from prescription drugs than from illicit drugs. But, about half of all prescription painkiller deaths involve at least one other drug, such as cocaine or heroin.

One in ten New Mexico youth take prescription drugs to get high. But pills are expensive, and heroin often follows. It's cheaper and easier to get. It's a lethal combination, and tragically our young people, and others, are dying from it.

On a New Mexico PBS program, one father shared a heartbreaking story about his young son's heroin overdose. This father said, "I looked for answers. Tried to figure out ways to help. What I kept hearing was you have to allow them to hit bottom...and some addicts die on the way to the bottom...even on the day he died he was on the phone looking for treatment centers that could help him."

That is why today's hearing is so important. Too many of these kids hit bottom and don't make it back. We have to do better to prevent abuse, to provide effective treatment, and most of all, to stop these tragic deaths.

In New Mexico, many folks are making a difference. The State Pharmacy Board, physicians, addiction specialists, epidemiologists, educators, and parents. Especially parents like Steve Paternoster, who lost his daughter Haley to heroin. Steve suffered an unimaginable tragedy, but now he advocates tirelessly for other families with addicted teens. All are working hard to confront this epidemic. They're working to increase public health and education efforts. And they are seeing results. New Mexico—along with Vermont—has the highest score for strategies to fight drug abuse.

We need to draw on what is working in the states and use our federal resources to implement effective programs throughout the country. Just last month, Senator Portman and I sent a letter, signed by several members of the Drug Caucus, to Attorney General Holder urging the

Department of Justice to draw on the many evidenced-based strategies that are being successfully employed in the states to address the heroin and opioid addiction epidemic. I ask that a copy of that letter be included in the hearing record.

But, more must be done. That's why I introduced the Increasing the Safety of Prescription Drug Use Act (S. 1657) last year to improve the training of health care practitioners, pharmacists and others to screen, counsel and refer patients potentially addicted to prescription drugs. The bill will improve the effectiveness of Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs by requiring their use and linking them to electronic health records in real time. It would also increase provider training to improve patient screening and referral for drug treatment. Finally, it would increase drug disposal opportunities and increase access to naloxone to prevent overdose deaths.

I also intend to introduce legislation soon to allow a carefully controlled clinical study of buprenorphine by nurse practitioners in underserved areas. I hope my colleagues will join me on both bills to expand access to effective treatment.

This epidemic affects all of us. It demands our attention. I look forward to the testimony of our distinguished witnesses. And thank you once again, Madame Chairman, for holding this hearing today.