

**WRITTEN STATEMENT OF**

**Jeffrey B. Stamm**

**Executive Director, Midwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA)**

**United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control  
Field Hearing – “Fighting For Iowans: Examining Drug Control, Prevention, and  
Treatment Efforts.”**

**October 14, 2021  
Cedar Rapids, Iowa**

Chairman Grassley and distinguished guests, I am honored to appear before you today to offer testimony concerning the critical problem of drug trafficking and abuse across Iowa and the nation, as well as efforts being made to address the problem. I am the Executive Director of the Midwest HIDTA, or High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, a program designed and funded under the auspices of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). The views expressed in this testimony are my own and do not represent any official position of ONDCP.

The Midwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) is committed to enhancing and improving the effectiveness of drug law enforcement efforts designed to disrupt the market for illegal drugs throughout the “heartland” of America. Comprised of 73 designated counties in Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Illinois, the Midwest HIDTA constitutes a complex and varied environment of significant threats from both home-grown and transnational drug trafficking organizations.

The goal of the Midwest HIDTA is to enhance and facilitate the coordination of regional drug-control efforts among local, state and federal law enforcement agencies in order to reduce drug trafficking and its harmful consequences in critical markets in the region. This includes coordination efforts to reduce the production, transportation, and distribution of illegal narcotics, as well as the attendant movement and laundering of drug proceeds. The Midwest HIDTA strengthens drug control efforts by forging partnerships among local, state, tribal and federal law enforcement agencies in facilitating information and intelligence sharing, cooperative investigations, and joint operations designed to reduce drug trafficking and drug availability. Moreover, the multi-agency HIDTA architecture is highly effective at functioning as a comprehensive and neutral coordination mechanism for law enforcement agencies across all jurisdictions.

The Midwest HIDTA currently supports 56 initiatives, including: 40 drug task forces, 6 domestic highway interdiction programs, 5 intelligence initiatives, 2 prevention initiatives, and 3 support initiatives. Such a balanced “partnership” approach requires the commitment of both personnel and resources by participating agencies with a shared philosophy of protecting the most vulnerable members of our states and communities from the harms of drug trafficking and abuse.

By identifying, targeting and dismantling the most violent and prolific drug trafficking organizations in the Midwest, HIDTA continues to incontrovertibly promote the safety and well-being of the citizens in the “heart” of America.

Specifically, here in Iowa, the Midwest HIDTA supports nine multi-agency counterdrug initiatives designed to reduce drug availability, enhance law enforcement capacities, and synergize with drug treatment and prevention efforts. Said initiatives are as follows: Cedar Rapids DEA Task Force, Des Moines DEA Task Force, Iowa Interdiction Support, Management and Coordination under Iowa DPS, Muscatine Task Force, Quad Cities Metropolitan Enforcement Group, Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Program, Tri-State Sioux City DEA Task Force and the Eastern Iowa Heroin Prevention Program. In all, the HIDTA program provides over \$2.7 million in supplemental funding to our local, state and federal partners working hard to protect Americans across Iowa and the region against predatory drug traffickers and the horrific human destruction and social decay that they spawn.

Nationally, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), a record 96,801 Americans died from a drug overdose in the last 12-month period ending February 2021. Most, but not all of them, caused by opioids. That amounts to 265 American dying, on average, every single day. Moreover, the country’s homicide rate has continued to rise again in recent years, spiking an astounding thirty percent just in 2020, according to the FBI. Many of those murders are fueled by drug use and distribution. In these, and other, negative intensifications, Iowa has not been immune.

Between 2018 and 2019, the latest figures available from the CDC, overdose deaths in the State of Iowa increased 24.4 percent overall. In that same one-year period, drug poisoning deaths attributed to opioids rose 18.9 percent, for psychostimulants (principally methamphetamine) the rise was 57.1 percent, and for cocaine the death rate escalated an astonishing 71.4 percent. Each of these figures can be directly tied to rising drug availability across the state and the nation. Yet as tragic as each and every drug-induced fatality is to the families of these victims, they are not the only measure of the depth of the problem, for the nexus between illegal drugs and crime is incontrovertible. Nearly two-thirds of Iowa’s—and the nation’s—overall property crime and violent crime is attributable to drug use and drug trafficking (see attached addendum: An Examination of the Relationship between Drugs and Crime in the Midwest). In fact, the Midwest HIDTA has found that more than 40 percent of the region’s homicides are traceable to drug use and/or trafficking.

Drug dealing is not a “non-violent crime.” It is inherently violent. In fact, with nearly 97,000 drug overdose deaths in our country last year alone, former drug czar John Walters has rightfully called it “the most murderous criminal activity in the history of America.”

The good news, however, is that law enforcement relationships and coordination, along with public safety/public health partnerships throughout Iowa are second-to-none. The multi-agency law enforcement response across the state is both highly effective and demonstrably serve to make the citizens of Iowa, and the region, safer. But they are overwhelmed as drugs continue to pour into the country across our southern border at the hands of ruthless Mexican drug cartels,

whose members are single-minded, zealous, highly ethnocentric and shockingly violent. The various Mexican cartels have set up command and control cells all across Iowa and the nation. They have sent their emissaries and salespeople here *solely* to sell drugs to Americans—not just heroin and fentanyl, but methamphetamine, cocaine and marijuana. They not only enslave and kill our fellow citizens, but undermine the rule of law by engaging in money laundering and other criminal acts. They foment gang activity and engage in violent and terroristic acts in order to make a profit on the backs of addiction.

In 2020, Midwest HIDTA drug task forces in Iowa identified 139 drug trafficking organizations operating in the state. All of them, directly or indirectly, tied to Mexican drug cartels. Through their incalculable dedication and efforts, Iowa local, state and federal law enforcement disrupted or dismantled 34 of those predatory groups that clearly resulted in reduced drug availability and greater public safety.

In just the first 8 months of this year (2021), Iowa drug task forces supported by HIDTA have seized 17 kilograms of illicit fentanyl, where next to none was encountered just four years ago. In that same period, they have removed over 463 kilograms of methamphetamine, representing a more than quadrupling over what was seized in 2015. Clearly, methamphetamine continues to represent the greatest drug threat to the citizens of Iowa in terms of individual harm, as well as related crime. And it bears reminding that, at present, there are no medication assisted treatment (MAT) options available for psychostimulants.

It is absolutely true that we are not going to be able to police our way out of this scourge. But it is also true that we are not going to be able to treat or prevent our way out either given the limited efficacies of our demand reduction efforts, however well-intentioned. We must be completely clear-eyed in our understanding that drug trafficking and abuse can never be controlled *without* the law enforcement component. And in their daily, Herculean attempts to do so, America's law enforcers are not the bad guys. They perform the difficult and dangerous tasks that their democratically-elected legislators require them to do on our behalf. To blame them for our nation's drug problems is to misallocate responsibility in a fundamentally mistaken way.

History has shown that every drug epidemic has been caused by two pivotal factors: availability and acceptability. To that, one could add the ubiquitous need for strong leadership.

### **1. Acceptability**

We don't necessarily have an opioid problem in our country but, rather, a *drug* problem. The opioid crisis is only one facet of our currently exploding American drug problem. Any comprehensive strategy against opioids must include making the use of *all* dangerous drugs not only illegal, but *unacceptable* to our society – especially to our most vulnerable and impressionable young people.

It is right that we seek to reduce the stigma associated with receiving drug treatment, but we must continue to stigmatize the decision to *use* illegal drugs in the first place, at least every bit as much as our culture has done with tobacco.

Currently, 30 million Americans are regular drug users. And that figure continues to rise, thanks to a society, and certain segments of government, that have taken their eye off the ball and have failed to clearly and compellingly make drug use disdained and wholly unacceptable.

## **2. Availability**

The impact of drug production and supply on drug use epidemics is not only unassailable, it is the one facet of drug control that government is perhaps most capable of affecting. The evidence is overwhelming that, while prevention and treatment are necessary elements of drug control, they're not sufficient. To be effective, our focus, to use the medical language of Dr. David Murray of the Hudson Institute, must be concentrated upon controlling the spread of the "pathogens" and their "vectors;" that is, the drugs and the drug traffickers. Only by making drugs scarce, risky and feared, can prevention and treatment programs gain traction. In fact, the best prevention program available to us is precisely the resolute enforcement of our legitimate and necessary drug laws.

For this reason alone, we must do more to block both the flow of drugs, and their cartel-sponsored distributors, at the southern border. The lives of every Iowan—and American—depend upon that elemental prerequisite.

## **3. Leadership**

The question of drugs is not one that simply and timidly requires a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable personal behavior; it's a struggle that demands our engagement, for it's nothing less than an existential threat to society. It's a question that demands from our leaders a clear delineation of human conduct for the maintenance of order and decency and safety, not absolution from personal responsibility and self-reliance.

Leadership that simply and naively vilifies the supposed failures of the "war on drugs" and proclaims an enlightened or equity-based approach that discounts the need for reducing the supply of drugs for more caring, therapeutic models not only ignores history's lessons, but sacrifices a critical motivating force in the moral suasion of our citizens—and their predators.

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to answering any questions.

Addenda:     Jeffrey B. Stamm Bio  
                  Midwest HIDTA Paper on the Drugs/Crime Nexus