**Senator Sheldon Whitehouse**

**Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control**

**Opening Statement – “Oversight of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and its 2022 *National Drug Control Strategy*”**

**June 15, 2022**

We lost over 107,000 Americans to drug overdose last year, including 453 Rhode Islanders, a painful reminder of the massive challenge ahead in addressing drug trafficking and substance use in this country. We must do better.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy, or ONDCP, has a comprehensive plan with ambitious goals to meet by 2025,including:

* A 13 percent reduction in drug overdose deaths;
* Doubling treatment admissions for the populations most at risk of overdose death;
* A 25 percent increase in the number of peer-led recovery organizations;
* Doubling the portion of federal inmates with an opioid use disorder who can access MAT ; and,
* A 25 percent increase in active investigations targeting the Sinaloa or Jalisco New Generation cartels and their enablers.

These goals, developed with input from national drug control program agencies and others, hold promise to turn the tide against the overdose epidemic. Several priorities deserve particular focus.

Prevention efforts are cost-effective and life-saving. The longer we can delay the age of first use of illicit drugs, the more likely we are to prevent addiction. Bolstering these programs is a smart place to start.

Treatment and some harm reduction efforts are also effective. Medication-assisted treatment and overdose reversal medications save lives every day, but most Americans who need treatment for substance use disorders don’t receive it. This has to change.

We must build the treatment and recovery workforces, establish best practices for recovery, and ensure a dedicated funding stream for recovery programs and the *Strategy* recognizes this.

Equally important are treatment courts and deflection programs, which connect non-violent drug offenders with treatment in lieu of incarceration, and reentry programs. I’m pleased that the *Strategy* prioritizes these programs, and I hope that ONDCP will use the best practices of Rhode Island programs, such as the LEADER program and the Rhode Island Department of Corrections MAT program, as national models.

My bipartisan bills, *CARA 3.0* and the *TREATS Act*, would boost the prevention, treatment, and recovery infrastructure, and permanently allow for medication assisted treatment via telehealth. I look forward to seeing these bills enacted.

We must also hold drug trafficking organizations accountable. Multi-jurisdictional task forces that target drug trafficking organizations have proven effective. Boosting such law enforcement work would be wise.

Most of the drugs Americans consume come from elsewhere. Mexican cartels source precursor chemicals for fentanyl and other illicit synthetic drugs from China and India. Colombia remains the primary source of cocaine consumed in the United States.

That all means we need to strengthen international partnerships with law enforcement abroad. We can reduce the flow of precursor chemicals and finished drugs crossing our borders, and hit drug trafficking organizations where it hurts them the most, which is their wallets. As long as cartels and their enablers can turn a profit, addiction and overdose deaths will continue to rise. So I’m pleased that the *Strategy* includes goals to increase the number of financial investigations into cartels by using suspicious activity reports, and to increase financial sanctions against members of some of the most dangerous cartels.

I’m disappointed in some of ONDCP’s choices. Cartels thrive where the rule of law is weak, and where corruption can flourish. We should help partner nations combat corruption and strengthen important institutions – like the courts – in jurisdictions that traffickers exploit. So it’s disappointing to see ONDCP’s 2023 budget request included a 16 percent cut to international programs that could help to address these problems.

Still, this *Strategy* offers ambitious goals and welcome changes. We will need to carefully measure success, as I’m sure GAO will discuss.

Right now, for instance, we don’t have a timely reporting of fatal and non-fatal drug overdoses, or a reliable baseline for basic information, like how much money we have denied and seized from drug trafficking organizations or the number of related prosecutions,. This kind of information is critical to measuring the *Strategy’s* effectiveness. I applaud ONDCP for recognizing the woeful inadequacy of our current systems, and I’m counting on them to help us turn the corner.

The stakes for the successful implementation of this *Strategy* are high. ONDCP has set goals, which, if achieved, will prevent tens of thousands of deaths over the next three years.

I look forward to hearing about how ONDCP will implement its *Strategy* andhow it will hold national drug control program agencies accountable for reaching the *Strategy’s* goals. I also look forward to hearing what GAO has to say about the *Strategy’s* compliance with its statutory requirements.

And with that I turn to my distinguished Co-Chair, Senator Grassley.