

TESTIMONY

Presented by

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Before the

Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

TACKLING FENTANYL

“The China Connection”

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Addressing Illegal Fentanyl exports

U.S. House of Representatives

Room 2200

Rayburn House Office Building

Good afternoon, Chairman Smith, ranking member Bass and members of the committee. My name is Joseph D. Coronato, I am the Prosecutor in Ocean County, New Jersey. Ocean County is the second largest county (land wise) in New Jersey. Our population is slightly over 600,000 people, 5th largest in New Jersey, but during the summer months our population exceeds 1,200,000, due to our beaches along the Atlantic Ocean.

I was sworn in as Prosecutor of Ocean County on March 22, 2013. As Prosecutor, I am the Chief Law Enforcement officer for the county. As such, the police chiefs of 32 departments and their approximately 1,600 sworn officers report to my authority. My office itself consists of approximately 200 employees: 50 Assistant Prosecutors; 95 Detectives and Agents and Support Staff.

Within two weeks of being sworn in as Prosecutor, there were eight opiate overdose deaths in Ocean County. All the victims were under the age of 28. One young girl, 18 years of age, died in a motel room. This young woman was doing 50 packs of heroin a day, 25 in the morning and 25 at night.

As a father of 2 children, I knew it was my responsibility to use every effort possible to address this epidemic.

Ocean County has become ground zero for overdose deaths in New Jersey in the last several years:

2012	-	53 Deaths
2013	-	112 Deaths
2014	-	106 Deaths
2015	-	120 Deaths
2016	-	217 Deaths
2017	-	174 (20% Reduction)

The Ocean County Prosecutor's Office and its local, State and Federal partners have attacked the opiate epidemic and it appears that we are having some success in this regard. With that being said, the impact of the "synthetic storm", the addition of fentanyl to the mix, has been devastating and continues to be a major concern.

Based upon our medical examiner toxicology analysis:

- 2014 - 10% of the overdose deaths had the synthetic component of Fentanyl in their systems
- 2015 - 30% of the overdose deaths had the synthetic component of Fentanyl in their systems
- 2016- 60% of the overdose deaths had the synthetic component of Fentanyl in their systems
- 2017 - 65% of the overdose deaths had the synthetic component of Fentanyl in their systems

2018 - 80% of the overdose deaths had the synthetic component of Fentanyl in their systems

A brief summary from the Ocean County Forensic Laboratory for 2017 and 2018 is startling. The number of Fentanyl laced submissions rose from 35% in 2017 to 52% so far in 2018. In addition, Fentanyl laced submissions now appear to frequently be combined with at least 14 other drugs such as cocaine, methamphetamine and alprazolam. Our county lab results are consistent with the New Jersey State Police Forensic Science Laboratory results. So far the State lab is showing a 53% increase in Fentanyl laced submissions statewide for 2018.

Ocean County has been tracking the opioid death rate on a monthly basis since 2014. To further emphasize the impact of synthetic opioids, in February 2017 there were 7 overdose deaths. In February 2018, there was a dramatic increase to 20 deaths. The increase can be attributed to a free heroin day that was promoted by the drug dealers in Camden, New Jersey. On that day there was no charge for the heroin wax folds. Ocean County suffered 8 deaths within a 3 day period. It should be noted that Camden and the surrounding Counties, Gloucester and Cumberland had similarly high death rates for the same period. Essentially, a bad batch of synthetic laced opioids was the cause.

On June 25, 2018, the U. S. Customs & Border Protection seized 110 pounds of Fentanyl in Philadelphia. As reported in The (Philadelphia) Inquirer:

U. S. Customs and Border Protection Agents in Philadelphia last week discovered 110 pounds of Fentanyl inside barrels of iron oxide shipped from China, authorities said.

The seizure June 25th netted Fentanyl with a street value of about 1.7 million, according to the agency. Stephen Sapp, an agency spokesman, said the cargo was flown into Chicago and then shipped by “truck in bound” through Philadelphia, but the officials did not specify where the seizure occurred or identify the cargo’s intended final destination.

This seizure further illustrates the significant impact that synthetic opioids have on the drug trade not only in the New Jersey/Philadelphia area, but throughout the entire country. The drug traffickers are businessmen who are seizing the opportunity to maximize their profits and simplify their distribution of same. Why grow a plant when you can synthetically produce/manufacture it at a significantly lesser cost.

In recognition of the threat that heroin and opioids presents to my region, the DEA/HIDTA recently established the Monmouth/Ocean County Post of Duty Task Force which will focus additional law enforcement resources to our problem. To that end, I want to again thank Senator Cory Booker, Representative Tom MacArthur, Representative Christopher Smith, NY/NJ HIDTA Executive Director Chauncey Parker and Monmouth County Prosecutor Chris Gramiccioni for their efforts.

As a result of an already strong working relationship between my Office and Federal, State and local authorities, a drug investigation was recently conducted which involved 6 counties in New Jersey , New York

and the Dominican Republic. One of the targeted drug dealers led investigators from Jersey City to the Bronx to Miami to the Dominican Republic. He then came back to Miami – went to California and was eventually apprehended in the Mid West. The individual was transporting 40 pounds of cocaine and 40 pounds of methamphetamine that was designated for our area (the East Coast). This is only one example of the national perspective and international aspect of the drug trade.

In my opinion, synthetics will become the predominate type of illegal drugs abused within the next 5 years. In fact we can now see in Ocean County that synthetic drug transactions are being transacted at an alarming rate, in many instances right over the internet from sites located abroad. The subsequent delivery of the internet synthetic drugs is literally to the door step of our abusers/dealers by the U. S. Postal Service, Federal Express or other delivery services as the case may be.

At least in Ocean County, we have created a partnership between law enforcement, the health care community and additional services which has had a substantial impact on reducing our overdose death rate by 20% despite the “synthetic storm”. The death rate in Ocean County for 2018 matches our 2017 level to date, with no increase even as synthetic opiates continue to be more prevalent.

While I am very proud of a number of anti-heroin/opiate programs we have implemented in Ocean County, I am most proud of our Blue HART Program. Blue HART allows addicts to voluntarily turn

themselves into one of eight different police departments in our County, and, without fear of prosecution, be referred into a long term rehabilitation program. Since we rolled the program out 1-17-17, over 600 individuals have availed themselves of the program.

Because of these synthetic opiates our effort to reduce overdose deaths here in Ocean County and elsewhere will be increasingly more difficult. I look towards the Congress to take the lead in this synthetic epidemic and to assist the law enforcement and health care communities with adopting comprehensive legislation to address the epidemic.

I believe there are a couple recommendations this committee could consider in helping to stop the international illegal sale of fentanyl. First, I believe our federal law enforcement needs to develop new partnerships with law enforcement in China and other countries where we have traditionally not had a significant presence. It is extremely important to control the production and distribution of synthetic opioids worldwide.

Secondly, I would ask the committee to consider that new investigative techniques need to be implemented for this illegal drug trade. We have seen, especially with fentanyl, internet purchases with home delivery of this dangerous drug. Traditional drug enforcement needs to adapt to this change in distribution patterns and federal resources need to be devoted to this issue. The internet ordering of illegal drugs, including fentanyl, and the delivery of that drug to your doorstep is the next storm.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this Committee and express my thoughts and concerns before you.