

More Help Needed With Opioid Crisis, Senators Told

WASHINGTON – Congress has made strides in helping battle the opioid abuse epidemic, but much more needs to be done, witnesses told a Senate committee on Thursday.

“The opioid epidemic is taking a terrible toll on pregnant women and infants,” Stephen Patrick MD, MPH, a neonatologist at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tenn., said at a Senate Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions (HELP) Committee hearing on the effect of the opioid crisis on children and families. “Every day, people are dying. Pregnant women are not getting the treatment they need and infants are spending their first few weeks in withdrawal ... These are our brothers and sisters and they need our help.”

Legislation passed by Congress, including the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, the 21st Century Cures Act, and the Protecting Our Infants Act “moved forward important public health priorities but would benefit from additional [reinforcement],” Patrick said. For example, “The Protecting our Infants Act resulted in a comprehensive strategy document from SAMHSA [the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration], but as [SAMHSA] notes, implementation is dependent on funding.”

Congress should consider additional action to increase the focus on prevention, increase the expansion of opioid use disorder treatment, and improve outcomes after discharge from treatment, he said.

Several senators appeared to be very moved by testimony from Becky Savage, the mother of two adolescent boys in Granger, Ind. who died in June 2015 from an accidental alcohol/opioid overdose.

“How could two boys who have always seemed to make good decisions in life make a choice that would ultimately cost them their life? My husband and I don’t understand. How could this happen? How did somebody’s prescription end up in the pocket of a teenager at a graduation party? Why wouldn’t they just say no?” she said.

“We may never know the answers to all these questions, but what we do know is that bringing awareness to this issue could save a life,” Savage added. “Prescription drug misuse and abuse was not even on our radar 2 1/2 years ago and therefore, never discussed with our children.”

Each panelist had suggestions on how to lessen the impact of the crisis on children and families. William Bell, PhD, president and CEO of Casey Family Programs, a Seattle organization that aids foster parents, said that he worked in New York City during the crack epidemic and “foster care’s role continued to go down ... One reason was because of the immense amount of prevention services available in the city.”

“One hazard [of the epidemic] is social isolation ... We’ve got to make sure families have access to prevention services, and that they’re not left alone,” he said. “Unfortunately, too many families have moved away from their extended family are living in communities where they’re apart ... Someone’s got to see that child every day so the support is there.”

Patrick suggested a comprehensive approach to the problem of substance abuse to help reduce neonatal abstinence syndrome, noting that SAMHSA estimates that 400,000 substance-exposed infants are born every year. Prescription drug monitoring programs and pre-pregnancy counseling are very important in bringing about good outcomes for families, he said.

“What parents can do is start the conversation,” said Savage. “Just bring it up with your children and start talking about it ... Encourage parents to clean out their medicine cabinets ...

and be responsible with the medications they do have. Make sure they know where they're at and keep them under lock and key. Treat them as a lethal weapon."

Committee chairman Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) outlined steps the committee planned to take. "Later today, I, along with Ranking Member [Patty] Murray [D-Wash.], and senators [Todd] Young [R-Ind] and [Maggie] Hassan [D-N.H.], will introduce legislation to help address the opioid crisis," he said.

"Dr. [Francis] Collins, head of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), has predicted that the development of a new, non-addictive painkiller could be achieved within 5 years with consistent funding and more flexible authority to conduct the necessary research," Alexander continued. "Our bill would give NIH more flexibility to conduct research to address the opioid crisis."

This committee plans to hold a markup on this bill, as well as other legislation to address the opioid crisis, as soon as March, Alexander said.

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