

## **Summary of Testimony of Philip G. Bauer**

### **The Center for Rural Pennsylvania Heroin and Opioid Public Hearing July, 2014**

Abuse of prescription drugs has fueled the biggest drug epidemic in Pennsylvania's history, driven in large part by the opiate drugs over the past 20 years – and we still have not been able to stem the tide of abuse. This health crisis has led to the significant influx of heroin throughout all parts of our state. Our citizens are starting down the path to dependence and addiction from the opioid painkillers, and then turning to cheaper and more pure heroin. Both the opioid painkillers and heroin are derived from synthetic opium, so it is a natural transition. It is my opinion that we will not be able to effectively address the heroin issue until we aggressively address the prescription drug abuse epidemic.

The dramatic upturn in drug abuse in the Commonwealth actually began in the mid 90's, when opiate painkillers started being prescribed by physicians. According to the Health Department's Bureau of Health Statistics and Research, approximately 2000 Pennsylvanians die a drug related death each year, and countless other families are dealing with the devastation caused by drug abuse. In 1991, 684 Pennsylvanians died from drugs, in 2001, the number was 1,000, and in 2011, 2,290 of our citizens died from drugs. It is the leading cause of accidental death in our state – exceeding deaths caused by motor vehicle crashes. According to a recent article published in the Philadelphia Inquirer, drug related deaths in PA. rose by over 20% from 2010 to 2011, and Pennsylvania now ranks 7<sup>th</sup> nationally in drug related death rates.

The solution to this public health crisis will not be easy. People need to be educated about the dangers of abusing medicines, we need to assure that pharmaceutical companies market their products ethically and responsibly, we need to make sure that drugs in our homes are secure at all times, and we also need to safely dispose of unneeded, unused or expired drugs.

Another critical part of the solution is to establish a prescription drug database which would give physicians, pharmacists, and law enforcement tools which will allow them to identify those seeking drugs for non-medical purposes. The database would support access to legitimate medical use of prescription drugs, identify and deter or prevent drug abuse and diversion, and facilitate and encourage the identification, intervention with and treatment of persons addicted to prescription drugs.

This is a personal issue with me. Several years ago, I had no idea how powerful Rx drugs were – nor did I know that these drugs were being abused and used for non-medical purposes. I found out when we found our youngest son Mark dead in his bed a week before high school graduation.

Mark died on what would have been his last day of high school. That morning, we found Mark unresponsive in his bed. Cookie called 911 and I started CPR. When emergency personnel arrived, we followed the ambulance to the hospital, were escorted to the “little room”, and then heard the words that our son was dead. For Cookie and I, life as we knew it ended that day.

In his room that morning, we found a clear plastic bag of loose pills. They weren't his, nor did they belong to anyone else in our house – they belonged to somebody! Per toxicology report - it was consistent with the pills found in his room. Mark died from a lethal mix of legal drugs. The high levels of morphine and oxycodone killed him.

Since Mark's death, I have traveled extensively to speak about the public health crisis of medicine abuse – throughout Pennsylvania and to many other states. I have also had the opportunity to testify before Congress, the PA House Human Service Committee, and the FDA, and have been a panelist for several congressional briefings on this topic. From this outreach, I have learned that prescription drug abuse – and the subsequent (and related) influx of heroin - is destroying families and communities throughout our state and throughout our country.

There is no way to tell someone what it's like to lose a child – you either know what it's like or you don't – and I sincerely hope that you don't. I am committed to do anything I can do help others avoid the devastation that Cookie and I live with everyday.

Respectfully submitted,

Phil Bauer

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