



**Center for Rural Pennsylvania
Public Hearing on the Current Heroin and Prescription Drug Epidemic**

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**Desepio Institute for Rural Health & Wellness,
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Good morning Chairman Yaw, Vice Chairman Wozniak and members of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. On behalf of Attorney General Kathleen Kane, thank you for inviting me here today to represent the Office of Attorney General's (OAG) Bureau of Narcotics Investigations and Drug Control (BNIDC) and to present testimony about the very real and serious threat of heroin and opioid use occurring throughout Pennsylvania.

My name is David Ellis. I am the Regional Director for the OAG's Region V which is located in North Huntingdon where we coordinate BNIDC's efforts in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Joining me today is Barbara Connelly-Sessaman, Regional Director for the BNIDC office in Butler, Anthony Sassano, Regional Director in State College, and other OAG agents, who are on the front-lines of this growing public safety and public health crisis.

As you will hear throughout the day, heroin and prescription drug use and abuse is not just an urban issue. Nor is it just a rural issue. This is an issue that crosses all geographic, social, and economic borders within our Commonwealth.

The amount of heroin coming into western Pennsylvania is staggering. A majority of which comes from New York and New Jersey through our Commonwealth's vast highway system. Heroin is arriving in the Pittsburgh area in bulk, where it is being cut and repackaged for distribution. It is also arriving pre-packaged in "bricks," or one gram of heroin packaged into five bundles, each containing 10 stamp bags or individual doses of heroin. Typically, 50 stamp bags are contained per brick.

Another area of significant concern for the OAG is the explosion in the diversion of pharmaceutical drugs for illicit sale and abuse. Pennsylvania has seen rapid, significant increases in prescription pill abuse, overdoses and overdose deaths, and illicit trafficking of pharmaceutical drugs. In many cases, the dependency on prescription pills becomes prohibitively expensive to maintain, costing users on average \$15.00 per pill. In some parts of Western Pennsylvania these prices may be as high as \$30.00 per pill.

Thus the abuser ultimately turns to heroin as a cheaper, more available, but deadlier alternative. 80% of heroin users report that their addiction began with prescription drug abuse. Part of the problem is that Pennsylvania, unlike many other states, does not have any means of tracking Schedule III, IV, and V controlled substances. The expansion of the state's current prescription monitoring program would assist in preventing prescription drug abuse and the ever increasing act of heroin use. By providing prescribing practitioners with relevant information concerning the drugs that have recently been prescribed to their patients, the ability to shop is hindered; additionally this tool would also deter unscrupulous prescribers from over prescribing.

Since taking office, Attorney General Kane has refocused our efforts on the influx on heroin traffickers and their product. The impact of these drugs on communities and families is devastating. Local law enforcement needs our help more than ever and it is imperative that we continue to work together to combat this epidemic.

Every day, our narcotics agents seize heroin and prescription painkillers from individuals of rural areas, many of whom have traveled to urban areas in order to obtain these drugs at very low prices. We have also identified individuals from urban areas traveling into rural areas and establishing networks for dealing heroin out of local homes.

The Pittsburgh metro area is the main source of heroin in southwestern Pennsylvania. Intelligence and street level operations have identified individuals from the Pittsburgh area dealing heroin in Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Cambria, Clarion, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Jefferson, Mercer, Somerset and Washington counties.

Intelligence has also identified those heroin dealers shipping the drugs into Pittsburgh. Many of them come from Baltimore, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, New York City, and Philadelphia. Many of these individuals are members or associates of street gangs, who are in Pennsylvania solely for the purpose of selling heroin. These dealers are then preying on smaller communities in Western and Central Pennsylvania.

It is clear through the work of our office as well as the work of our local, state, and federal law enforcement partners, that heroin is currently the drug of choice throughout Pennsylvania. The purity of this heroin is high while the price is low, as you can see in the chart provided with my testimony.

	Heroin Cost		
	Stamp bags	Bundles (10 stamp bags)	Bricks (50 stamp bags)
Pittsburgh area	\$8 to \$10	\$70 to \$90	\$300 to \$400
Johnstown	\$15 to \$17	\$90 to \$125	\$250 to \$275
Latrobe	\$10 to \$12	\$100 to \$120	\$500
Indiana	\$15	\$130 to \$150	\$350 to \$500
Greene County	\$15 to \$20	\$150	\$300 to \$375

The majority of heroin addicts admit that their addiction began with prescription painkillers. Many begin by taking pain medication legitimately prescribed by a doctor for an injury or ailment. However, some begin taking pain pills obtained from their family member's medicine cabinet or even their friends. Whatever the case, the same sad tale usually follows: the user ultimately turns to heroin because the cost is lower and the drug is much more readily available.

In an attempt to halt the progression from prescription pills to heroin, BNIDC has agents in each Regional Office who focus solely on the illegal diversion of prescription drugs. The OAG also participates in the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) Drug Diversion Task Force. These investigations can be time consuming, requiring significant technical resources. Typically, financial investigations are conducted simultaneously to identify and seize assets illegally obtained by the doctor.

Over the past several years OAG agents from Butler, North Huntingdon, and State College regional offices have worked closely with local and federal law enforcement agencies to arrest and prosecute nine doctors charged with prescribing outside the normal practices for prescription narcotics. These doctors were responsible for hundreds of thousands of illicit prescription pills entering our communities.

Heroin and prescription drug overdoses also continue to rise each year, and as previously mentioned this horrible statistic does not discriminate between rural and urban areas of the Commonwealth. Over the last year, there have been several instances in Western Pennsylvania that have illustrated the difficulties for law enforcement to obtain accurate data on non-fatal heroin overdoses. This not only hinders an investigation, but it also limits our ability to gather intelligence information that may lead to higher-level traffickers, help our prosecutions, or, most importantly, information that may save lives.

Furthermore, the trafficking of heroin throughout Pennsylvania is being directed and controlled by violent individuals, generally associated with drug cartels. A significant number of these individuals have been arrested by agents and officers participating in projects and task forces supported by the Attorney General's BNIDC.

Where we are finding heroin, we are also finding guns at alarming rates. The mixture of drug activity and guns produces violent activity in much of Pennsylvania. The North Huntingdon region alone has seized more than 70 guns in the last 15 months. Approximately a third of these weapons were listed as stolen or the serial number had been removed. These numbers do not even include those guns seized during joint investigations with federal agencies.

Beyond the direct impacts of heroin on addicts and their families, the increase in drug trafficking in rural areas has broad impacts on the quality of life. Police chiefs from the North Huntingdon region have seen an increase in direct and ancillary crimes being committed in their communities such as burglaries, robberies and vehicle entries. Most of these crimes are committed by heroin users in an attempt to find a few dollars to fuel their addiction.

To fight back against both the drug use and subsequent violence, Attorney General Kane has made collaboration a focus. Leveraging resources, and combining intelligence and expertise, we have been able to make swift and lasting impacts on communities across the Commonwealth.

Here in western Pennsylvania, BNIDC enjoys an excellent relationship with our local, state and federal counterparts. In BNIDC this region directs countywide drug task forces in Greene, Mercer and Westmoreland counties. In those areas, our narcotics agents work directly with local police and the District Attorney's Office on a daily basis.

Most recently, last week, OAG partnered with local law enforcement in areas, Johnstown/Somerset and Huntington, to make two large-scale sweeps that each sought thirty suspected drug-dealers.

In Armstrong, Cambria, Fayette and Somerset counties, we are currently working projects that target heroin and prescription drugs. These projects are federally funded through an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force Program (OCDETF).

Beginning in March 2013, BNIDC became involved in another OCDETF project targeting the sale of heroin and prescription drugs. This operation has resulted in 127 arrests, including 60 arrests in Westmoreland County and 34 in Allegheny County. Arrests were also made in Butler, Cambria, Fayette, Somerset and Washington counties.

Seeing the successes of earlier task forces we began yet another OCDETF project in October 2013, targeting violent drug trafficking activity in Cambria and Somerset counties. A majority of the 49 individuals that were arrested are from outside the region or the state or have connections to individuals from outside the region or the state.

The BNIDC agents have also been working with state troopers of the State Police Troop A on impact drug operations. Uniformed state troopers partner with uniformed local officers to provide expertise in SHIELD operations. These operations have been highly successful. In addition to heroin, we have seized fentanyl, guns and hundreds of thousands of dollars.

BNIDC agents also work hand and hand with agents from the DEA and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) on large scale drug cases occurring in Western Pennsylvania. Since March, we have worked three cases with our federal partners that resulted in the seizure of over 225,000 stamp bags of heroin (carrying a street value of more than \$2.25 million), 20 firearms, and approximately \$850,000 in cash.

These strategic operations are well received. The local police departments have become more effective in their day to day responsibilities and communities have become more engaged as they see drug activity diminishing in their neighborhoods.

The concept of these operations is thorough, utilizing multiple investigative tactics and means including: confidential informants, undercover operations and surveillance to secure probable cause for a search warrant on the dwelling where heroin is being sold or stored. Often, BNIDC is serving these search warrants within days of opening the investigation.

Throughout this testimony I have outlined many instances of both arrests and seizures, but it is important to note that the Attorney General does not measure our success solely by the number of arrests or seizures we make, but also by the impact we are making on communities and the quality of life in areas overrun by drug trafficking and use.

Attorney General Kane and all of us at the OAG appreciate your focus on this important issue facing communities across the Commonwealth. We believe that we are making a real impact, but there is always more work to be done.

We will keep up the fight and we look forward to continuing our efforts to work collaboratively across jurisdictions to have the broadest, most lasting impact on communities in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I would be happy to take your questions.