

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania  
Public Hearing  
Confronting the Heroin / Opioid Epidemic in Pennsylvania

Thursday, April 21, 2016  
Geisinger – Lewistown Hospital

Remarks of Cory J. Snook, Esquire, Juniata County District Attorney

Good morning. Thank you, Senator Yaw, Chairman of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, Senator Corman and other distinguished guests for organizing this public hearing on the opioid crisis facing Pennsylvanians. Thank you also for affording me the honor and opportunity to address you today.

My name is Cory Snook, and I've had the privilege of serving as Juniata County District Attorney since 2010. Juniata County is the personification of rural Pennsylvania, located approximately half-way between Harrisburg and State College. However, it is certainly not sheltered from the issues facing all of Pennsylvania. Heroin and opioid abuse is an epidemic that has our rural Pennsylvania towns under siege from the crippling effects and consequences that stem from their use. Many of the charges filed for crimes committed in Juniata County have their roots planted in drug use. Beyond the charges for the possession of the drugs themselves, the use of these powerful and dangerous substances lead to a lifestyle of crime and extensive involvement in the criminal justice system. Many offenses that we repeatedly see committed by those in the grips of opioid addiction include Driving Under the Influence, Theft by Unlawful Taking, Burglary, and Delivery of a Controlled Substance, to name just a few as examples. All

of these crimes have a negative impact in our communities because they put into jeopardy the safety of the citizens who live here. But another piece of the heroin and opioid epidemic that often goes unaddressed is the underlying issue as to why the crimes are being committed in the first place. Many of the individuals who are brought before the court on charges such as those mentioned previously are there because heroin or other opioids have taken control of their body and decision making capabilities. So the question then becomes, if we can so easily pinpoint the cause of so much of the crime being committed in our towns, why then do we have so few resources in place to address this cause?

It seems that a popular solution to the drug problem sweeping across Pennsylvania is to just throw these offenders in prison for their crimes and forget about them. Locking them up and forcing them to go without the drug will cure all of their problems, right? This obviously is not the answer. When dealing with a drug as powerful and dangerous as heroin, just simply warehousing addicts without addressing the underlying addiction will do nothing to stop the ongoing problem. Make no mistake, I wholeheartedly believe that individuals convicted of a crime need to be appropriately punished for their actions. Often, that calls for incarceration. What needs to be looked at are long term treatment options that can be put in place so these offenders have an outlet to turn to while serving their time and once they are released. Heroin and opioid use is a disease that takes over the user's mind and prohibits them from making good decisions. It is essential to have programs in place to not only treat each individual, but also to teach them what is necessary to stay off of the drug once they re-enter society. We need to stop the vicious cycle of incarceration, release, and relapse.

One of the problems is that insurance will typically not cover a stay at a rehabilitation facility after an individual has served significant time in jail. I believe the thought process

behind this decision is that the individual has not used drugs recently (because they have been incarcerated) and so the insurance companies think there is not an urgent need for rehabilitation. Insurance will often cover rehabilitation after a very short jail term, but too much “clean” time will typically disqualify an individual from insurance coverage for rehabilitation. In addition, local jails, while offering some treatment options, do not have the resources to adequately address and treat someone in the midst of heroin or opioid addiction. It is somewhat of a “catch – 22” situation in that the jail does not or cannot offer sufficient treatment options, and when the individual is released from jail, insurance will not pay for a stay in a rehabilitation center because the individual is “clean” at this point.

State Correctional Institutions offer more treatment options for drug addiction than local jails, but that is often not the answer. Do these drug addicts deserve to be locked up in a state correctional institution with murders and rapists? Sometimes their crimes dictate this to be the case, but oftentimes a state sentence is not warranted. Juniata County has had some success with programs such as the State Intermediate Punishment program, in which the individual spends a number of months at a state correctional institution, and then “steps down” to a community corrections center or halfway house before being re-integrated into society. However, we have also had some failures due to the location of some of these halfway houses in neighborhoods where drugs are readily available.

The statistics show that heroin and opioid addicts fail a number of times at recovery before being able to manage their addiction and lead a productive life. We must strive to reduce the number of relapses so that individuals achieve long term sobriety before these powerful drugs take their lives. What happens after someone has been locked up, received some form of help, and gotten their body clean of the drug? The danger with relapse is that once we have helped the

users start to get off of these drugs, a relapse occurs at a dosage considered normal when taken at the height of their drug use. Their bodies can no longer manage that same dosage of the drug and an overdose, and even possibly death, can occur. This again ties back into treatment options for those looking for help to kick these drugs.

Another major issue facing Central Pennsylvania is the lack of education where a difference and impact can truly be made to the youth in the local school systems. The sad truth is that this terrible heroin and opioid issue has found its way into the hallways and classrooms of our schools. Our educational institutions have now been infected with these powerful drugs, and something needs to be done. Better outreach programs that go into the elementary and middle schools to educate our youth on the dangers of drug addiction are an important starting point. If we can get to these children in time and show them just how much of a negative impact these drugs can have on their lives, there's no telling how many lives could be saved. But as is the case in all facets of life, education should not end with our teenage years. Programs to educate people of all ages on prescription drug and heroin abuse are very important. Prescription drugs can be found in almost every household. Their abuse can also be directly linked to future heroin use. Teaching the community about proper disposal of unused or leftover prescription drugs in places such as a local drop box are important to try and cut out the opportunity to get hooked on these drugs.

This brings up one of the important underlying issues in this struggle. Why are there so many unused prescriptions drugs and painkillers in our medicine cabinets? We also need to be speaking with and educating the medical professionals who are prescribing opioid painkillers and other prescription drugs. My wife had knee surgery last year and was prescribed forty (40) oxycodone and twenty (20) oxycontin painkillers. She took less than 10 total. I realize every

patient and every situation is different, but the over-prescribing of painkillers is a significant contributing factor in this epidemic and it needs to be addressed.

This battle against the heroin and opioid epidemic is one that is not going to be defeated in a day, a week, or even a year. It is something that will take a long time and a lot of work. But one thing that we do know for certain is that changes need to be made or this evil is going to continue to grow and get worse. As with most problems you are faced with, many of the issues come down to funding. I think everyone can agree that it would be great to provide funding to the counties to pay for rehabilitation stays after someone is released from jail. It would be fantastic to give local jails money to provide better treatment options. Everyone should be in favor of funding additional educational programs both in the schools and in the community. The bottom line is the bottom line... where is this funding going to come from? There are many grant opportunities through agencies such as the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency that Juniata County doesn't qualify for or simply can't meet the requirements. Many of these grants come with burdensome specifications, oftentimes being funneled down from the federal government. I understand the trepidation of just giving a county a pool of money and telling it to do good deeds. I'm not advocating for that. I just feel that removal of some of the requirements and specifications while maintaining oversight is warranted. I certainly don't want you to raise taxes to find new funding streams. I think the money to address this pressing issue is already out there in the form of wasteful spending. I commend you for the job you've done in passing budgets that rein in spending without increasing taxes.

I thank you for the opportunity to address you today and I again thank you for sponsoring this public hearing to address the heroin and opioid epidemic facing Pennsylvania.