

Statement for the Record by Congresswoman Mary Bono Mack

House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Hearing on “Assessing US Drug Policy in the Americas”
October, 15, 2009

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member Mack and Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today on our government’s approach to reducing the supply of and demand for drugs in the Western Hemisphere. The challenge is one that encompasses so many parts of our lives, from our law enforcement efforts, scientific research, to diplomatic priorities and also to so many families across our country.

Our US drug policy is one that is intricately woven into many branches of government, but really is one that I would argue can and indeed must be tackled at the community level. I have personally experienced the effects of someone struggling with drug addiction in my own family, much like I’m sure others in this room have. Our efforts in Congress need an aggressive set of goals, and in some cases, an approach that needs to be refreshed.

That’s why it was encouraging to see the Subcommittee pass H.R. 2134 just a few minutes ago. I look forward to helping the Chairman and Ranking Member in pushing this legislation forward to the full House as soon as possible.

This Commission is needed, as the fight is ongoing, and with this legislation we can gather the necessary information to begin shoving back against the numbers of those using these dangerous substances, which are staggering within our own borders. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, in 2008, over 20 million Americans aged 12 or older were current illicit drug users—that’s 8 percent of that group of citizens. Though the numbers relative to some drugs are stabilizing, we are still seeing the shift to new drugs, like the prescription drug abuse epidemic affecting rural and urban America, across all economic groups.

We’ve seen in the media the violence in Mexico spread across the border, and drug operations moving onto U.S. federal lands, which are only a few examples of why the work of the Commission is critically important to focusing our fight against this menace.

My son became addicted to prescription drugs, and it is a battle that we will continue to fight as a family. But only with the right tools can parents and communities lessen the impacts to those they love.

I seek to work with this Committee, Mr. Chairman, along with the House Energy and Commerce Committee, on which I serve, to strive to create a foundation for a domestic and international drug policy that balances maintaining our vital law enforcement efforts with an augmented demand-side effort toward reducing substance abuse and addiction.

There are a few specific programs we can take a closer look at, and I'm hopeful the Commission created in H.R. 2134 does as well. In particular, we should recognize the work undertaken by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. They are at the tip of the spear for tracking and assisting with the foreign criminal justice systems on the law enforcement side of this equation, while also seeking to address demand-side problems that continue to increase in both source and transit countries.

It's my firm belief that their demand-side program is critical to showing our commitment to helping other nations impacted by the scourge of drugs and building a shared sense of mission and solid international alliance to confront this threat.

After all, we can't ignore the fact that as current trafficking routes mature, the addiction can easily move to the money made from moving a product to the drugs themselves, which can contribute to dragging down local populations. The Department's INL Bureau actively works to leverage taxpayer dollars so that we're working collaboratively with community groups, local schools, and faith-based organizations. That's key because it's really where we can start to see the important changes within families once a region has been stabilized.

At some point families living everywhere from Medellin, Colombia to cities in the United States should have the strong democratic foundation for communities that rely on each other to actively fight drug trafficking. Only with this level of engagement can we begin to have real, lasting effects on the other impacts narco-traffickers have on our societies, from trans-national crime, money laundering, paramilitary aggression, and undemocratic governments that would choose to fund these criminals.

With that, Chairman Engel and Ranking Member Mack, I am hopeful that we are starting down the path of a renewed focus on our approach to international drug policy in the Western Hemisphere, as this issue should never take on a partisan tone. I thank you again for the opportunity to testify and again, look forward to supporting H.R. 2134 as it moves forward.