



Prepared Hearing Statement of Senator Chuck Grassley
Responding to the Prescription Drug Abuse Epidemic
Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control
July 18, 2012

Madam Chair, the abuse of prescription narcotics, such as pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives, is currently the fastest growing drug abuse trend in the country.

Millions of Americans are prescribed controlled substances every year to treat a variety of symptoms due to injury, illness, and other conditions. However, these drugs, when not properly used or administered, are just as addictive and deadly as street drugs like methamphetamine or cocaine.

Recent studies and reports show this growing trend of prescription drug abuse. According to the most recent National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), a survey conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services, roughly two and a half million people aged 12 and older used prescription drugs non-medically for the first time in 2010. This averages to about 6,000 people per day abusing prescription drugs for the first time.

For Iowans, prescription drugs account for the fastest growing form of substance abuse. Overdose deaths in Iowa from the non-medical use of hydrocodone (Hi-dro-co-don) and oxycodone (ox-e-co-don) pills have increased 1,233 percent since 2000. According to data from the Iowa Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, these two drugs comprise over a third of all prescriptions in Iowa with 85 million doses prescribed in 2009. The State Poison Control Center states that calls concerning these drugs have skyrocketed 2,031% since 2002 indicating an increased amount of diversion. These are statistics that cannot be ignored.

There are many reasons for why prescription drug abuse has become such a large problem. One reason is because the medication is easy to obtain. Many people have the view that since the drug is obtained by a doctor's prescription the drug must be safe for anyone to use. According to the NSDUH, more than half of the people who abuse prescription narcotics reported that they obtained controlled substances from a friend or relative, or from the family medicine cabinet. With the rise of prescription drug abuse, pharmacies have become the victims of a drastic increase in robberies involving controlled substances. Pharmacies are also under strain because they have been targeted in DEA crackdowns designed to curb the increase in prescription drug abuse. We are lucky to be joined today by Dr. Joseph Harmison, a pharmacist who operates three

local pharmacies in Dallas and understands firsthand the pressure that pharmacies are under in the wake of increased illicit drug use.

Clearly this is a problem that requires the efforts of not just law enforcement but also other community partners such as community anti-drug coalitions, doctors, pharmacists, educators, and parents to raise awareness and take appropriate action to stem the prevalence and abuse of these drugs.

State prescription drug monitoring programs can be an effective tool to help stem this abuse. These monitoring programs can be used by practitioners to assist in identifying potential diversion, misuse, or abuse of controlled substances by patients. However, according to data captured by the Gateway Impact Community Coalition, an anti-drug coalition headquartered in Clinton, Iowa, some healthcare practitioners are not using the Iowa system to its full potential.

Iowa's prescription monitoring program has been operational for three years. However, according to a survey conducted by the Gateway Impact Coalition, 85% of Clinton County Iowa prescribers report prescription drug abuse is a problem in the community yet only 52% of prescribers actually use the monitoring system. The same survey also shows that nearly half of prescribers in the county are not aware of any efforts to address prescription drug abuse. Because of this survey the Gateway Impact Coalition has identified an area where they can have a direct impact in the fight against prescription drug abuse through increased education of practitioners.

Iowans have also been impacted by an inability to obtain medicine that is properly prescribed to them due to a series of prescription drug shortages. This May, I joined with my colleague Senator Whitehouse and requested that the GAO conduct a study on the potential connection between the DEA's quota system and the prescription drug shortages that have been reported in Iowa and across the nation. I hope that today's hearing will also shed light on the way that these shortages could have occurred and what can be done to make sure that individuals can have access to the prescriptions they need.

This hearing is a good opportunity to explore ways in which Congress can help to expand or raise awareness of tools that can help communities and practitioners identify and stem the abuse of prescription drugs. At least 41 states currently have or have authorized prescription drug monitoring programs. If many of these states or communities have a similar problem as Clinton County Iowa, we have a long way to go to meet our potential to reduce prescription drug abuse. I look forward to hearing from the witnesses and exploring actions we can take to stop this growing epidemic.