Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control
"Drug Trafficking Across the Southwest Border and Oversight of U.S Counterdrug Assistance to Mexico"
Tuesday, November 17, 2015
Prepared Statement of Chairman Chuck Grassley of Iowa

Just over eight years ago, the United States and Mexico announced the creation of the Merida Initiative, a bilateral partnership between our governments intended to reduce the flow of illegal drugs into the United States, combat corruption, and strengthen the rule of law in Mexico. Yet the border isn't secure, and in some ways the problem seems worse than ever.

The purpose of our hearing today is to examine the assistance that the United States has provided to Mexico under this program, help evaluate its effectiveness, and to discuss ways to help bring about better results. American taxpayers deserve to know if their money is being spent wisely. And if it isn't, changes need to be made.

In addition, the recent attacks in Paris remind us that our interest in a secure border isn't just about stemming the flow of illegal drugs. Secure borders are essential to guarding against a range of threats to our economic and national security, including terrorism.

The Merida strategy has four pillars: (1) disrupting the operational capacity of organized crime; (2) institutionalizing the capacity to sustain the rule of law; (3) creating a 21st century border structure; and (4) building strong and resilient communities. Congress has appropriated about $2.5 billion worth of training, equipment and technical assistance to Mexico through it, and over $1.3 billion of that has been delivered.

However, despite all that money spent, our border security hasn't improved by many measures. Mexico remains a major transit and source country for illicit narcotics destined for the United States, and a hub for money laundering.

For example, Mexico remains the primary supplier of heroin to the United States. And according to the Drug Enforcement Administration, Mexican drug trafficking organizations are making a concerted effort to increase heroin availability here. They appear to be succeeding. Heroin seizures at the southwest border have more than doubled over the last five years, from 2010 to 2014.

Heroin trafficked from Mexico has fueled an epidemic of opioid abuse in many parts of the country. One of the states that's been hit hard by this crisis is New Hampshire, and Senator Ayotte has been a leader in the Senate in finding ways to address it. I'm glad she is able to participate here today.

In addition, Mexican drug trafficking organizations are filling the void created by declining domestic production of methamphetamine. About ten years ago, Congress passed a series of laws that made it much more difficult to produce meth here. For example, these laws required pharmacies to sell medicines containing common meth ingredients from behind the counter. Domestic production of meth decreased significantly.

Yet meth continues to plague my home state of Iowa. Meth-related treatment admissions are at an all-time high there. And last year, nearly half of all drug-related prison admissions in my state resulted from the trafficking or abuse of meth.

I held a Judiciary Committee field hearing in Des Moines last month to learn more about the problem. Law enforcement there identified Mexican drug trafficking organizations as the source of the increasingly pure meth that's starting to show up across Iowa. Sure enough, meth seizures along the southwest border were up dramatically over the past five years, and up 20 percent from 2013 to 2014 alone.

So it's important for me to hear what is being done to address the trafficking of both heroin and meth across the border, both of which seem to be getting worse, not better.

These can't be the result the United States had hoped for on this side of the border when the Merida Initiative began. In addition, there are troubling signs about the situation on the Mexican side as well.

While the Mexican government estimates that violence is down in some respects, kidnappings and extortions are up. And in one instance in May, a drug trafficking organization may have effectively adopted paramilitary tactics when it used a rocket-propelled grenade to shoot down a Mexican military helicopter.

In addition, the number of extraditions to the United States authorized by Mexico fell sharply in recent years, from 115 in 2012 to only 54 in 2013 and 66 in 2014. And Mexico reportedly refused to extradite "El Chapo" Guzman, the notorious leader of the Sinaloa cartel who was captured in 2014, before his escape from a Mexican prison in July.

Finally, public corruption and human rights violations in Mexico remain significant problems. Prison officials, for example, appear to have played a role in "El Chapo's" escape. Mexico's National Human Rights Commission has alleged that soldiers have engaged in execution-style killings. And local police and public officials were reportedly involved with the kidnapping and disappearance of 43 student protesters in September 2014. As a result, just last month, the State Department declined to certify that Mexico was making adequate progress on human rights, triggering a cutoff of about $5 million in aid for Mexican security forces.

Now, there are some signs of hope, including Mexico's adoption of a new code of criminal procedure, and its ongoing transition to a transparent, adversarial criminal justice system with public trials. These changes won't happen overnight, but they may help Mexico address organized crime more effectively going forward. This is an area where training and other assistance from the United States may be beneficial. But as in all areas, metrics need to be developed that will allow us to measure whether this assistance has been effective, as this Caucus recommended in 2011.