

Statement of Chairman Sherrod Brown
“Stopping the Flow of Fentanyl: Public Awareness and Legislative Solutions.”
January 11, 2023

I call this hearing to order.

The fentanyl crisis is one of the gravest threats facing all of our communities.

Every year, about 5,000 Ohioans die from unintentional drug overdoses.

In 2022, a staggering 110,000 Americans lost their lives as a result of an unintentional overdose. Imagine each year losing a city nearly the size of Dayton, Ohio, or North Charleston, South Carolina or Billings, Montana, or Wilmington, North Carolina.

And behind all of those numbers are stories – stories of families torn apart. Of parents losing teenagers before they graduate high school. Of grandparents stepping in to raise grandchildren.

No matter where you come from, pretty much everyone has a fentanyl story – it may be in your own family, it may be a neighbor, it may be a coworker. We’ve all lost someone, or know someone who’s lost someone.

It's a crisis that cuts across all geographic lines, and certainly across all partisan divides.

It's why it has been and will continue to be a top priority of this committee, where we have taken bipartisan action.

With Ranking Member Scott and the entire Banking Committee, and now 67 Senate cosponsors, we worked in a bipartisan way to design a new sanctions program – the FEND Off Fentanyl Act – that can help reduce the flow of fentanyl into our communities.

On this Committee, our purview is often money – and we are using that authority to hit the cartels and chemical suppliers directly where it hurts: their bank accounts.

The cartels that traffic these drugs from Mexico are billion-dollar operations. Our bill goes directly after those billions.

China is the main source of precursor chemicals for illicit fentanyl – supplying the Mexican cartels who then traffic fentanyl into the United States. Chinese entities also then help launder the money for the Mexican cartels.

The new economic sanctions authority and money laundering penalties created by the FEND Off Fentanyl Act will go after all of these components of the illicit

fentanyl supply chain, and help stop more of it at its source – before it ever reaches our communities.

Now, when we talk about sanctions regimes and directing the Treasury Department to block assets, the discussion can get pretty technical – and pretty sterile – awfully quickly.

It's why the focus of today's hearing is on the human toll that illicit fentanyl takes on our families, our friends, our neighbors.

Our focus today is why this work matters – and why we must finish the job, and get this bill signed into law.

Today, we are going to hear from Mr. Jason “Jelly Roll” DeFord, to testify about his personal experience in communities that have been devastated by the addiction crisis.

I'm guessing most of you didn't have “Jelly Roll testifies at Senate Banking hearing” on your 2024 bingo cards. But few speak – and sing – as eloquently, as openly, as, shall we say, viscerally about addiction as he does.

There is a reason why Americans flock to his music and his concerts. He has a connection with people based on shared pain, shared challenges, shared hope.

Today we will also hear from National President of the Fraternal Order of Police, Mr. Patrick Yoes, about his members' work on the front line of the response. Law enforcement officers live this crisis every day in their work – and one of the best ways we can support them is preventing fentanyl from flowing freely through the communities they serve.

And Mr. Christopher Urben, a veteran DEA agent, to describe the trail fentanyl and its proceeds take.

This crisis has many dimensions, including border security, public health, demand reduction, and economic stability. Everyone has a role to play, and sadly, no single step is going to make this problem completely disappear.

We aren't – or shouldn't be – in the business of false promises.

What we can do is take an “all of the above” approach, to reduce as much pain and save as many lives as possible.

Fentanyl is often mixed with other substances, including cocaine and Xylazine. I am a co-sponsor of the Combatting Illicit Xylazine Act, which establishes penalties for manufacturing, distributing, or dispensing xylazine for illicit use.

We should also pass my bipartisan POWER Act, which would provide state and local law enforcement with high-tech, portable fentanyl screening devices. I thank President Yoes' organization for their support of that legislation.

I have also demanded that the Treasury Department hold the governments of China and Mexico accountable for curbing illicit fentanyl trafficking. It's clear the Mexican and Chinese governments are not doing enough to combat the flow of fentanyl.

We need specific benchmarks for combating fentanyl trafficking and the opioid crisis, and more information regarding the role of the recently announced Treasury Department Counter-Fentanyl Strike Force.

It is vital that we effectively monitor the Administration's efforts to stop fentanyl at its source.

I call on my colleagues to use their membership on committees to explore legislation that will help us treat addiction, improve our public health response, and stop the trafficking of illicit fentanyl into our communities.

A crisis this massive and multi-faceted demands our sustained focus. That is my pledge as chair of this committee, and my pledge to people of Ohio.

That starts with getting our bill signed into law.

FEND Off Fentanyl passed out of our committee unanimously. I think my colleagues would all agree we are a diverse group – there's not a lot we can find complete unanimity on. But we were able to find common ground on an issue vital to all of our states and our country. And our colleagues in the Senate agreed, passing this with overwhelming bipartisan support as part of the Senate NDAA.

The House needs to finish the job, and get this bill to the president's desk. This is our chance to show the people we serve that we can work together, we can put partisanship aside, we can take action on things that really matter to their lives.

Families and law enforcement in all of our communities are counting on us. Let's get this done.

Ranking Member Scott.