



TELEHEALTH | RESEARCH | POLICY | ACTION

December 15, 2023

United States Senate Special Committee on Aging Summary | Understanding a Growing Crisis: Substance Use Trends Among Older Adults

On December 14, 2023, the Senate Special Committee on Aging, held a hearing titled [“Understanding a Growing Crisis: Substance Use Trends Among Older Adults”](#). The purpose of this hearing was to discuss the vast, growing crisis of substance use and abuse among our aging population, specifically 65 and older.

This hearing was chaired by Senator Robert P. Casey (D-PA) and Ranking Member Senator Mike Braun (R-IN). Both Senators provided staggering statistics on the growing number of elderly Americans currently struggling with substance use disorders (SUD) and abuse. In 2022, upwards of 4 million adults were identified as having used and abused illicit substances, with a specific focus on fentanyl. 1 in 4 older adults currently experience mental health disorders associated with SUD. Between the years 200 and 2020, mortality from drug overdoses has more than tripled. If left uncontrolled, these numbers will continue to climb to unmanageable levels.

Senator Braun addressed the importance of controlling the supply of illicit drugs and synthetics into our country. “We can’t fight the crisis, without reducing the supply”, said Senator Braun. A heavy focus was placed on the need for increased screening technologies, identification education, and removal of these drugs before they make their way into our communities.

In May 2023, Senator Casey Co-Sponsored the bipartisan [Fentanyl Eradication and Narcotics Deterrence \(FEND\) Off Fentanyl Act](#), which targets the fentanyl supply chain from the chemical suppliers in China to the cartels that traffic the drugs from Mexico. More recently, Senator Casey cosponsored the [POWER Act](#), which would establish a new grant program through the Department of Justice to aid state and local law enforcement organizations in securing high-tech, portable chemical screening devices to identify illicit drugs and substances, such as fentanyl and xylazine. This legislation builds off the [INTERDICT Act](#), which Senator Casey supported and was signed into law in 2018.

In March 2023, Senator Braun Co-sponsored the [Modernizing Opioid Treatment Access Act](#) within the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP). Methadone is a proven, powerful treatment for opioid use disorder (OUD), this bill expands access to methadone for an individual's unsupervised use to treat their OUD, granting them the ability to receive necessary treatment outside the walls of a typical treatment facility. Senator Braun recently released a detailed report, "[The Silent Epidemic. Fentanyl and Older Americans](#)", which examines the increase in overdose deaths among older Americans as the U.S. continues to grapple with the dangers of fentanyl.

Expert testimony was provided by 4 distinguished experts in the field of substance abuse treatment (listed in speaking order):

Keith Humphreys, PhD

Esther Tiny Memorial Professor, Psychiatry, and Behavioral Sciences
Stanford School of Medicine

The Honorable James W. Carroll, JD

Former Director, White House Office of National Drug Control Policy
Partner, Frost Brown Todd, LLP

Deborah Steinberg, JD

Senior Health Policy Attorney
Legal Action Center

William Stauffer, LSW

Executive Director
Pennsylvania Recovery Organization Alliance

Each witness provided expert testimony, focusing on the escalating issue of substance abuse among older adults. Below is a highlight of each of their testimonies:

Dr. Keith Humphreys, PhD from Stanford School of Medicine identified the rising trends and escalating rates of SUD. The fatal drug overdose rate among Americans 65 and older has quadrupled from 2002 to 2021. Dr. Humphreys emphasized that most of these were unintentional and involved illicit drugs like fentanyl, cocaine, and methamphetamine. While many of these deaths were unintentional, intentional drug overdose deaths primarily affected white women, while unintentional deaths disproportionately affected men, especially African-Americans, with a notable increase in deaths among older African-Americans due to the prevalence of fentanyl in illicit drug markets. Dr. Humphreys recommended the expanded access of specialty SUD treatment programs for Medicare enrollees, the extension of insurance parity protections to Medicare Advantage enrollees, as well as increased screening and guidance within Medicare to cover not just opioids but tranquilizing medications for anxiety and sleep disorders.

The Honorable James W. Carroll, JD, former Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), addressed the financial impact these growing cases of substance use and abuse are having on our economy. The substance use crisis results in substantial economic costs; impacting healthcare, the criminal justice systems, and productivity across many markets. Efforts to curb the crisis are essential, and should involve not only providing treatment on the ground, but creating barriers around the supply chain, specifically international trafficking routes. Increased education on the powerful impacts and benefits of Naloxone, a life-saving drug for opioid overdoses, is also needed.

Deborah Steinberg, JD, a Senior Health Policy Attorney with the Legal Action Center, focused on improving access, equity, and opportunities for individuals seeking treatment. While improvements have been made for Medicare coverage following the SUPPORT Act of 2018 and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, gaps still remain. Congress needs to apply the Mental Health Parity and the Addiction Equity Act to Medicare to ensure non-discriminatory coverage, barriers in the Medicare Advantage plan should be removed, and coverage should be expanded to include community-based and residential SUD treatment facilities. In addition, to encourage providers to offer services, reimbursement rates for a variety of practitioners involved in SUD treatment should be increased. Ms. Steinberg also highlighted the importance of expanding services beyond opioid use, addressing barriers vulnerable populations face when entering society from criminal justice systems, and allowing mobile crisis response services to reach more patients.

William Stauffer, LSW, the Executive Director from the Pennsylvania Recovery Organization Alliance, concluded the testimonies. Mr. Stauffer addressed the need to reduce and remove stigmas associated with individuals undergoing SUD treatment and/or in recovery. The belief that older individuals are "set in their ways" creates additional hurdles in acknowledging and addressing their substance use issues. Mr. Stauffer recommends Congress invest in infrastructure for older adult care, address the growing workforce shortages of skilled workers, fill in gaps of funding for the full continuum of care, and encourages the establishment of an Older Adult Recovery Community Corp to utilize the skills of this population to aid in the recovery of those around them.

CTeL's Analysis: What's Next?

There are many pieces of legislation of interest surrounding substance use and substance use treatment in process. While many of these bills will provide great impact and support for this population, CTeL believes the inclusion of the expansion of telehealth, remote patient monitoring (RPM), and remote therapeutic monitoring (RTM) for these services will provide even greater impact. Including RPM/RTM as essential components to these bills, allows providers and communities to receive vital health information from patients in programs, therapy, and recovery. This real time information has the ability to prevent thousands of unnecessary overdose deaths, allow for faster

interventions, and identify harmful medical interactions as they occur. CTeL is encouraged by the continued conversations and action by congress on increasing access to equitable, quality healthcare for our communities.

For more information on this hearing, [please visit here](#).

[Members | Senate Special Committee on Aging](#)

Chair: Senator Robert P. Casey (D-PA)

Ranking Member: Senator Mike Braun (R-IN)

Democratic:

Kirstin Gillibrand (D-NY)

Richard Blumenthal (D-CT)

Elizabeth Warren (D-MA)

Mark Kelly (D-AZ)

Raphael Warnock (D-GA)

John Fetterman (D-PA)

Republican:

Tim Scott (R-SC)

Marco Rubio (R-FL)

Rick Scott (R-FL)

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