

ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH CONGRESS
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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
“Warning: The Growing Danger of Prescription Drug Diversion”
Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade
April 14, 2011

Nonmedical use of prescription drugs is a serious and escalating problem. We are seeing not just pain reliever abuse, but also abuse of stimulants, tranquilizers, and sedatives. In 2009, 16 million Americans age 12 and older had taken a prescription pain reliever, tranquilizer, stimulant, or sedative for nonmedical purposes at least once in the year prior to being surveyed.

I appreciate the Committee looking into this issue.

Prescription drug abuse is a public health problem, not just a law enforcement problem. Reducing this abuse will require a multifaceted approach and partnership among federal, state, and local agencies.

We need to do a better job of educating the public, and in particular, those prescribed the medicine, of the drugs' inherent risks. There is an inaccurate perception that just because the drug is a legal medicine, it is somehow less harmless, less addictive, and less risky. We must change this public perception.

Seventy percent of all those who illegally use a prescription drug get that drug from a friend or family member. In some cases, that drug has been stolen from a friend or family member. But in other cases, these drugs are being given to children by people they trust. Similarly unacceptable, parents are using their children's prescriptions.

We also must better educate health care professionals including doctors, dentists, and pharmacists, about the proper and intended uses of these medicines. When prescribed appropriately, these medicines provide much needed relief. Cancer patients have had their suffering reduced by opioid pain killers. However, a person with an acute, short term pain maybe able to find pain relief from a less addictive pain killer.

Furthermore, every state should have a prescription drug database. These databases help states identify and address drug diversion, so they should be as robust and effective as possible. States should be allowed to share information, with due regard for privacy expectations; information should be added to the databases regularly, including by encouraging prescribers and

pharmacists to use these databases. When used, they can help doctors and public health authorities prevent and respond to the potential devastating effects of prescription drug abuse.

Communities, including high schools and universities, must also do more. They are the key to early identification and intervention. They are also part of successful safe disposal solutions. Nonmedical prescription use is often connected with other problems such as alcohol abuse or school drop out. We must look for red flags. For example, those who participate in the nonmedical use of prescription drugs also are more likely to engage in other risky behaviors such as drinking and driving. Additionally, illicit drug users generally are about 16 times more likely than nonusers to report being arrested and booked for larceny or theft.

Madame Chairman, I wish there was one, but there is no easy fix to this horrific problem. I want to express my commitment to working with you on all approaches to stop this growing danger.