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Grassley: 2 bills to combat scourge of drugs need House action

BY CHARLES GRASSLEY, U.S. senator

Dubuque recently witnessed the unimaginable suffering caused by the growing blight of addiction that has taken hold in our communities.

Vicki Allendorf, an anti-addiction advocate, lost two of her sons, Zachary and Terry McPoland, to heroin overdoses on the same day. Her family's tragedy shows the indiscriminate and unforgiving nature of addiction, a deadly disease that can befall anyone.

Dubuque is not alone.

The United States is in the midst of an historic epidemic of drug overdose deaths. More than 47,000 Americans died from overdoses in 2014 – more deaths than were caused by either gun violence or car crashes that year. In Iowa, both heroin overdose deaths and opioid-related emergency visits have just about doubled from a few years ago.

Addiction affects Americans from all walks of life. It destroys lives, families and communities. The Telegraph Herald, in its editorial of April 17, rightly acknowledged that fighting the scourge of heroin “must involve more segments of society than this community.”

We must work to prevent people from abusing drugs in the first place, but we can't stop there. We must also ensure that robust treatment services are available and stem the tide of drugs flowing across our borders.

In January, I convened a Judiciary Committee hearing on the growing heroin epidemic and how Congress can help fight it, and the committee then quickly acted.

The Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016, or CARA, starts with prevention and education. It authorizes awareness and education campaigns. It creates a national task force to develop best prescribing practices, so that doctors don't expose their patients to unnecessary risks of addiction. It encourages the use of prescription drug-monitoring programs like Iowa's, which helps detect and deter “doctor shopping” by addicts.

And the bill authorizes an expansion of the federal initiative that allows patients to safely dispose of old or unused medications.

The bill also authorizes an expansion of Drug Free Communities Act grants to those areas that are most dramatically affected by the opioid epidemic. It authorizes funds for programs that encourage the use of medication assisted treatment, provide community-based support for those in recovery, and address the unique needs of pregnant and post-partum women who are addicted to opioids.

Importantly, the bill also expands access to life-saving overdose reversal medications for first responders and law enforcement, reserving a portion of these funds for rural communities, where the nearest hospital might be many miles away.

In February, the Judiciary Committee approved CARA unanimously, and in March, the bill passed the full Senate by a vote of 94-1. I hope the House of Representatives will take it up as soon as possible.

While much of the bill focuses on heroin and opioid abuse, it also includes provisions to battle methamphetamine, which by some measures is an even greater problem in Iowa.

In addition, we must address the supply of these substances. The surge in heroin use has coincided with Mexican drug cartels flooding the United States with cheap, highly potent heroin.

In response, Sen. Feinstein, of California, and I wrote the Transnational Drug Trafficking Act, which makes it easier for the Department of Justice to prosecute drug cartels. It passed the Senate last year and, like CARA, it awaits action by the House.

Every life that's lost or changed forever by this crisis is precious. Especially for many young people who fall victim to addiction early in their lives, there is so much human potential at stake.

It's time to get CARA and the Transnational Drug Trafficking Act signed into law to help communities like Dubuque fight back against addiction.