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May 5, 2017

Mr. Richard Baum
Acting Director
The White House
Office of National Drug Control Policy
750 17th Street, Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear Acting Director Baum,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment to the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) on the omnipresent opioid and substance use disorder epidemic that continues to devastate families and communities across the United States. This pervasive issue requires and rightly deserves the full attention of all facets of our government – from those in the White House down to our local elected officials – and I am pleased that you have given me the chance to offer input for the ONDCP's annual *National Drug Control Strategy (Strategy)*.

In Connecticut, we have seen the number of fatal drugs overdoses skyrocket, with 917 people dying in 2016 – a 25 percent increase from the previous year.¹ Connecticut's Chief State Medical Examiner James Gill cited fentanyl, a drug almost exclusively manufactured overseas and trafficked into the United States, as "driving much of this increase."² Unfortunately, Connecticut's fentanyl crisis has become one of the worst in the country, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) determining that Connecticut had the second largest increase of fentanyl deaths in the country.³

In an effort to hear from those who are most intimately involved in solving the opioid epidemic, I hosted nine roundtables throughout Connecticut to solicit input from those on the frontlines of this crisis. Each of these key stakeholders – whether they were mental health professionals, first responders, law enforcement officials, or those in recovery – had important stories and ideas to share. Following these discussions, I released a report titled *Opioid*

¹ Rondinone, N. (2017) Opioid Crisis Continuing As Overdose Deaths Jump 25 Percent In 2016. *Hartford Courant*. Retrieved from <http://www.courant.com/breaking-news/hc-ocme-overdose-numbers-0224-20170223-story.html>

² Altimari, D (2017) Fentanyl Fueling Connecticut's Overdose Crisis. *Hartford Courant*. Retrieved from <http://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-opioid-overdose-numbers-2016-20170224-story.html>

³ Rondinone, N. (2017) CDC: Connecticut Second In Percent Increase Of Synthetic Opioid Deaths Rate. *Hartford Courant*. Retrieved from <http://www.courant.com/breaking-news/hc-cdc-fentanyl-overdoses-20170105-story.html>

Addiction: A Call to Action outlining twenty-three specific recommendations to alleviating the impact of this brutal epidemic. Attached is a full version of the report for review.

Along with the recommendations included in this report, ONDCP should prioritize the following in its upcoming *Strategy*:

- The vital need for funding of states and local organizations to implement preventive programs, particularly through the Drug-Free Communities Support program;
- Access to affordable health care through both public and private insurance, including Medicaid, which plays a central role in providing access to treatment, and the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which provides coverage and important protections for individuals struggling with addiction;
- The need for mental health parity in insurance coverage for effective substance use disorder treatment programs;
- The continued development of research on effective prevention methods and treatment programs, including medication-assisted treatment opioid-free pain management alternatives;
- Continued funding of partnerships between Federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement to reduce drug trafficking through the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas program;
- Encouraging partnerships between law enforcement that emphasize increased public awareness of substance use disorder over criminalizing addiction and those who are struggling with this disease.

Over the past several years, ONDCP has made strides in recognizing and treating the opioid epidemic as a public health and safety crisis that will be overcome through prevention and treatment of substance use disorder. It is critical that ONDCP continues to maintain this guiding principle into the future and equally important that the Administration and Congress recognize the integral role access to affordable health coverage plays in ending the opioid epidemic.

It is also vitally important that the work of ONDCP remains a priority for the Administration. I am troubled that there appears to be a lack of urgency from this Administration in providing information to the public as the ONDCP website has yet to be updated to provide current information and rather simply says “check back soon for more information.”⁴ Even more disturbing are recent reports that the Trump Administration’s Fiscal Year 2018 budget will cut funding for ONDCP by 95 percent, which would leave countless Americans who have been impacted by substance use disorder without resources or support. I agree with you that these cuts, paired with the apparent lack of prioritization of ONDCP’s important role, would be “frankly heartbreaking.”⁵ The critical work that you do at ONDCP must continue and must be made public on ONDCP’s website to show that combating the opioid epidemic is in fact a priority for this Administration.

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp> on May, 5 2017.

⁵ Diamond, D. (2017) Trump Budget Would Effectively Kill Drug Control Office. *POLITICO Pro*. Retrieved from <https://www.politicopro.com/health-care/story/2017/05/trump-budget-would-effectively-kill-drug-control-office-156394>

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on the opioid epidemic and the past work that ONDCP has done to alleviate this scourge. I look forward to working with ONDCP on this important issue going forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard Blumenthal". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Richard" and last name "Blumenthal" clearly legible.

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate