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Policy Memo – Fentanyl and Drug Overdose in the United States

Problem Statement

According to the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, “fentanyl is a potent synthetic drug approved by the Food and Drug Administration for use as an analgesic (pain relief and anesthetic)” (DEA, 2023). While this drug can be helpful and is regularly used by physicians to treat patients experiencing severe post-operative pain, it can be extremely dangerous when produced and sold by illegally. After the drug became popular and known for its effects on a person, people considered to be a part of the “black market” took it upon themselves to create their own version of fentanyl, sell it, or put large amounts of it in other illegal, yet less deadly and potent drugs. Due to their misuse and unethical decisions, hundreds of thousands of people have died in just the past few years. With every year that passes, it appears as though the number of opioid and fentanyl related deaths continues to increase. According to USAFacts, there were around 200 deaths each day in the year 2022 due to fentanyl alone (USAFacts, 2023). Because this is a large-scale problem that is taking place all across the country, there are a variety of decision-makers; however, we will focus on the federal and state governments, as well as the legislators within them that hold much power in their positions as policymakers. For this purpose of this analysis, only a few of the many current policies and the decision-makers of them will be discussed.

Background

Over two decades ago, the United States of America faced an issue that was the first of its kind. Since that time in the mid-nineteen-nineties, multiple system failures have led to where we stand today– in a national drug and opioid crisis. Although this big problem has been recognized and attempts to fix it have been made, not much change has occurred due to the lack of effective policies and enforcement of the ones in place. Although I was aware of this growing issue, I had not realized all of the problems and failures that have led to so many people losing their life until my cousin tragically lost his from a fentanyl overdose in 2022. Like many others, his addiction began with a prescription for medication that was intended to help him after an intense surgery. Under these circumstances, both federal and state legislators are the decision-makers as they have the power to decide the amount and type of medications can legally or ethically be given to patients. Sadly, we often find issues such as this placed on the backburner for legislators since they are more difficult to tackle, require a lot of work, time, dedication, agreement, and more. Despite the harm that has been done, dangerous opioids are still approved by the government and one its agencies, the FDA; therefore, they continue to be prescribed by physicians because very little policies exist to restrict the types or amounts of these medications.

Options Analysis

Option one – banning dangerous drugs and changing the strategy of treating post-operative pain for patients: Because of the risk of long-term addiction that comes with prescribing opioids to patients, as well as the fact that there are safer, more holistic ways to treat post-operative pain, policymakers in government should collectively work together to ban this practice along with many of these drugs, and promote the implementation of a new approach that

will make strong and addictive opioids no longer necessary. A few ideas for treating pain were given by Dr. Jay DeMarco at a TED Talk in 2019 following the death of a patient and friend due to an overdose (DeMarco, 2019). Some of these effective and safe protocols include the use of “long-acting anesthetics,” technologically advanced ice therapy, physical therapists, and non-narcotic medications (DeMarco, 2019). Along with these, Dr. DeMarco also discussed the importance of physicians speaking with patients before and after a surgery to have an understanding of their mental health and personal community as part of the practice of holistic care (DeMarco, 2019). By adopting pain protocols such as this, the care offered by physicians would be enhanced and more patient-centered while also working toward a day in which prescription opioids are not needed or allowed.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, federal, state, and local governments in the United States quickly acted by creating and enforcing policies in order to prevent more fatalities from the virus. On the other hand, there was “a 30% increase from 2019” to 2020 in drug overdose deaths during the same year, and yet there was very little response (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Without dedication and action by those in power, the number of deaths have and will continue to rise while the issue is seemingly forgotten and not properly addressed. Although the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has a program for opioid overdose, the focus appears to be on educating the public on the different medications along with what actions to take after a person has overdosed, which can sometimes be helpful but is not a proper preventative measure (SAMHSA, 2023).

Option two – Taking preventative actions and investigating following a fentanyl-related death: For actual change to occur, steps must be taken toward stopping the counterfeit pills from circulating and being sold. This would require decision-makers, including federal and state law makers, to make more restrictive policies that will likely increase border patrol and law enforcement’s role in confiscating the deadly pills. Since most fentanyl in America comes from cartels in Mexico by smugglers, more intense searches or investing in better technology for scanning might lead to less illicit drugs coming through. Far too often after an overdose, law enforcement fails to further investigate, find where the drugs were bought, and apprehend those who sell them. By officers and investigators actually finding those who committed the crime and ultimately gave buyers drugs which they knew contained deadly amounts of fentanyl, others might begin to understand that the government is not taking the issue lightly and will not tolerate dealers continuing to cause unnecessary deaths. Along with this, illicit drug dealers are not given appropriate punishments or assisted after being released, which leads to them continuing to sell them. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration also investigates overdose deaths, but struggle to bring many dealers to justice (DEA, 2023). By creating more clear and restrictive legislation, as well as providing funding and proper resources to enforcement agencies, policy makers can do more to end this epidemic.

Option three – Promoting mental health and making help more accessible: According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, “7.7 million adults have co-occurring mental and substance use disorders” (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2023). Because of this comorbidity rate, it seems as though more accessible mental healthcare would be especially beneficial for those suffering from addiction and substance misuse. Often times, the costs for sessions with a mental health professional is too high for many people. Additionally, therapy is not usually covered by insurance companies, which makes it more difficult for people to get the help they need.

By taking action and adopting new policies such as these, my hope is that decision-makers across the country can help prevent people from losing their loved ones, just as I did. While change never comes quickly, especially with a problem as large as this, I am hopeful that the amount of overdose deaths will decline in the years ahead, that this issue is given more attention, and a greater effort is made to save lives.

References

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