

United States Senate

March 20, 2020

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito
Chairman
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Senate Committee on Appropriations
131 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jon Tester
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Senate Committee on Appropriations
131 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Capito and Ranking Member Tester,

As the Subcommittee begins deliberations on Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Homeland Security Appropriations Legislation, we ask your support for increasing the screening capabilities of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to detect deadly illicit fentanyl crossing our borders. We know that you share our dedication to combatting the opioid epidemic that is harming communities across the United States, and appreciate your consideration of this request.

Fentanyl is a particularly deadly synthetic opioid, up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. It is so powerful that even a few salt-sized grains can be deadly. According to provisional statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for the twelve-month period ending February 2019, 7 out of 10 of drug overdose deaths in the United States were due to opioids, with almost half of those opioid deaths caused by fentanyl or another synthetic opioid — resulting in roughly 23,000 fentanyl-related deaths. The influx of this deadly drug has overwhelmed both law enforcement and health officials, who were already struggling to respond to an opioid epidemic fueled by prescription drugs and heroin.

Although pharmaceutical fentanyl can be misused, most fentanyl deaths are linked to illicitly manufactured fentanyl. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, Mexico and China are the primary sources for illicit fentanyl trafficked into the United States. Fentanyl produced illicitly in Mexico is smuggled across the southwest border of the United States or delivered through the mail and express consignment couriers. Fentanyl purchased online and from overseas vendors is principally shipped to the United States through the mail or express consignment carriers, often concealed within legitimate goods.

CBP has had success interdicting fentanyl and other synthetic opioids with hi-tech chemical screening devices and the support of scientists in CBP laboratories. But CBP needs consistent funding for these resources to catch and stop more of these deadly drugs from coming into the United States. We appreciate the investment made in FY 2020 for the purpose of detecting and interdicting opioids, and ask that you continue to invest in this critically important task. By providing CBP with additional portable chemical screening devices at ports of entry and consignment facilities, we can increase CBP's ability to intercept fentanyl and other synthetic opioids at the border. Additional equipment and scientists in CBP laboratories will increase its ability to rapidly interpret screening test results from the field and perform more robust testing.

Combined, these resources will help safeguard field personnel from exposure to these deadly drugs and prevent them from entering the country.

We must give CBP the help it needs to stop illicit fentanyl from getting into the country. Therefore, we respectfully ask that the Subcommittee support continued funding for opioid detection equipment in FY 2021.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Senator Edward J. Markey
Senator Joe Manchin III
Senator Jeanne Shaheen
Senator Thomas R. Carper
Senator Margaret Wood Hassan
Senator Tammy Duckworth
Senator Angus S. King
Senator Sheldon Whitehouse
Senator Christopher Murphy
Senator Tim Kaine
Senator Tina Smith
Senator Kyrsten Sinema
Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr
Senator Elizabeth Warren
Senator Dianne Feinstein
Senator Richard J. Durbin
Senator Sherrod Brown
Senator Jack Reed
Senator Corey A. Booker
Senator Christopher A. Coons
Senator Kamala D. Harris
Senator Richard Blumenthal
Senator Gary C. Peters
Senator Mark R. Warner
Senator Amy Klobuchar
Senator Benjamin L. Cardin