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PENNSYLVANIA

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United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3805

April 24, 2020

Mr. James Carroll
Director
Office of National Drug Control Policy
750 Seventeenth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20503

Dear Director Carroll:

I write today in support of Westmoreland and Lawrence Counties' applications for designation as a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA). Over the last several years, Pennsylvania has become an epicenter of the opioid crisis, which has created serious public health challenges and has strained the resources of law enforcement. If approved, these HIDTA designations will allow Westmoreland County and Lawrence County to better coordinate law enforcement efforts, identify and dismantle large-scale criminal organizations and improve the safety and security of their residents.

The HIDTA program was created by Congress in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 to reduce drug production and trafficking in targeted regions across the United States. The program promotes information- and intelligence-sharing among law enforcement officers at the federal, state and local levels and provides support so that regions can more effectively pursue their enforcement activities. HIDTAs across the country have been designated since the program began, and counties are frequently added to or removed from HIDTAs in response to the changing threats that drug production and trafficking pose in these areas. For example, in September 2018, the Office of National Drug Control Policy added Allegheny, Beaver and Washington Counties in Pennsylvania to the Ohio HIDTA.

Studies have indicated that Pennsylvania is one of three states with the highest rates of death due to drug overdose, largely fueled by the opioid epidemic plaguing too many of our communities.¹ In addition to the staggering loss of life, Pennsylvania's Auditor General has reported that the opioid crisis has cost Pennsylvania taxpayers approximately \$25 billion annually.² This crisis has

¹ *Drug Overdose Deaths*, CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/statedeaths.html> (last visited Feb. 21, 2020).

² EUGENE A. DEPASQUALE, PA. AUDITOR GEN., A DEADLY DOSE: FENTANYL'S IMPACT IN PENNSYLVANIA (Oct. 16, 2019), <https://www.paauditor.gov/press-releases/auditor-general-depasquale-fentanyl-crisis-costs-society-billions-action-needed-to-prevent-overdoses-and-save-lives>.

hit Western Pennsylvania particularly hard—even being described as “Ground Zero” for the opioid epidemic by the U.S. Attorney in the Western District of Pennsylvania, Scott Brady.³ In recent years, we have seen some progress in reducing opioid deaths in Western Pennsylvania, but the issues plaguing these communities are far from resolved. Unfortunately, it is clear that as Western Pennsylvania has tried to close the door on the opioid crisis, more doors have opened for other types of illicit drug use and drug trafficking. Recently, U.S. Attorney Brady commented on the need to fight the “fourth wave” of the crisis after identifying an increase in incidents in Western Pennsylvania involving cocaine, crack and methamphetamine.⁴

This crisis has directly impacted Westmoreland County and Lawrence County. Since 2014, Lawrence County has had approximately 840 reported overdose-related incidents, which resulted in 203 deaths. In Westmoreland County, there have been 237 overdose-related deaths in just 2018 and 2019. This crisis has not only resulted in a significant number of overdose-related deaths, it has also contributed to a surge in violent crime. In the City of New Kensington in Westmoreland County, the community experienced over 570 incidents of violence—including assaults, sexual assaults, robberies, abductions, homicides and shootings—in 2017 and 2018. During the same time period, in the City of New Castle in Lawrence County, there have been over 200 arrests for felony assaults, robberies, murders and rapes.

Leaders in Southwestern Pennsylvania are taking this issue seriously. The wide-ranging support that these HIDTA applications have received in the Southwestern Pennsylvania region—from federal, state and local law enforcement offices—is a testament not only to the scope and severity of the drug crisis, but also to the commitment and conviction with which the community seeks to tackle it. A HIDTA designation will provide these stakeholders additional tools and funding to address the multifaceted problem of drug trafficking—especially the life-threatening opioid crisis—through an organized, collaborative effort.

In conclusion, I write to voice my support for Westmoreland and Lawrence Counties’ HIDTA applications, and I strongly urge you to give them full and fair consideration in light of the ongoing challenges that the area faces.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

³ Press Release, U.S. Att’y’s Office, W. Dist. Of Pa., U.S. Attorney Brady: Western Pennsylvania’s Response to the Opioid Epidemic Resulted in a Dramatic Decrease in Overdose Deaths in 2018 (Mar. 8, 2019), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdpa/pr/us-attorney-brady-western-pennsylvania-s-response-opioid-epidemic-resulted-dramatic>.

⁴ Chauncey Ross, *Region’s Top Prosecutor Sees Fourth Wave of Drugs*, INDIANA GAZETTE (Jan. 18, 2020), https://www.indianagazette.com/news/region-s-top-prosecutor-sees-fourth-wave-of-drugs/article_1a3c3dd4-3a08-11ea-9f79-5f9a658ba9bb.html.