

Where He Stands: *The Opioid Crisis*



The opioid crisis is real. You've heard about it on the news. You've read about it in the newspaper. You may even know someone whose been directly affected by opioid addiction. In fact, no part of Michigan is safe from the ravages of this epidemic.

The evidence is undeniable: Since 1999, prescription drug overdoses in Michigan tripled and heroin overdoses quadrupled, according to the CDC and state sources. People who misuse prescription painkillers such as Oxycontin, Fentanyl and morphine are up to 40 times more likely to end up as heroin users.

This crisis is deadly and it's getting worse. Overdoses from *prescription* opioids killed 1,257 people in Michigan during 2015, up 13.5% from the previous year. In 1999, only 22 percent of the state's drug overdose deaths were contributed to opioids and heroin abuse. By 2015, it was up to 67 percent, according to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Many of our law enforcement agencies and first responders are overwhelmed by the crush of overdoses – not just in big cities, but also in small towns and rural areas. Michigan Senate District 19 (Barry, Calhoun and Ionia counties) is not immune to this crisis by any means. Even our emergency rooms are seeing dramatic spikes in opioid abuse. Stepping up enforcement against drug dealers and rogue doctors is part of the solution, but it isn't enough. And the federal government cannot solve this problem on its own.

When it comes to addressing this growing crisis with public policy changes, I believe a bi-partisan package of laws and enforcement actions is needed. We must work together on a comprehensive solution that addresses every aspect of the challenge. *In fact, we are making progress.* Last year, Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette announced the formation of a new "Opioid Trafficking and Interdiction Unit" for the state. So far, this new unit has arrested and/or convicted dozens of people for trafficking heroin and other opioid-based drugs in Michigan.

Several other bi-partisan responses to the opioid crisis are also worth serious consideration, including:



- Increasing funding for drug addiction prevention programs in our schools. *Prevention is key!*
- Making it easier for people fighting addiction to get treatment and counseling using proven care models.
- Holding pharmaceutical companies and drug distributors responsible if they "dump" vast amounts of opioids in the Michigan market in quantities far beyond our state's bona fide medical needs.
- Expanding and improving access to the Michigan Automated Prescription System (MAPS) to help health care professionals stop "doctor shopping" by opioid addicts seeking multiple prescriptions. This can be done without violating individual patient privacy laws.
- Using the same MAPS system to help law enforcement identify and prosecute doctors who illegal prescribe vast amounts of painkillers in so-called "pill mills."
- Teaching doctors, nurses and clinics how to respond to the opioid crisis in a more proactive manner.
- Requiring medical examiners to specify the drugs involved in cases of overdose death.

Important: We must *also* remember that some patients desperately need access to painkillers due to terminal illnesses, chronic pain and other ailments. Let's not go overboard and deprive these patients with legitimate needs.

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