

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 19, 2015

The Honorable Sylvia Matthews Burwell, Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Burwell:

Since your confirmation as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, we have been pleased to see you prioritize efforts to address the opioid epidemic wreaking havoc on communities across the nation. It is in this spirit of bipartisan collaboration that we write you to: 1) encourage you to call on the Surgeon General to issue a Report and Call to Action on opioid abuse; and 2) to seek clarification on your opioid abuse initiative.

Our home states of Massachusetts and Kentucky have been hit particularly hard by the opioid epidemic. In Massachusetts alone, 2014 saw a 33 percent increase in overdoses from heroin or prescription painkillers since 2012, with more than 1,000 fatalities. Similar statistics in Kentucky show that the Commonwealth continues to lose more than 1,000 lives to overdoses each year. In 2013, nearly 32 percent of these overdoses in Kentucky involved heroin. This crisis of opioid related overdoses strikes without regard to geography, age, race, or socio-economic status and it requires an immediate and sustained response.

Given the magnitude of this epidemic, we believe a Surgeon General's Report will help highlight the seriousness of this public health crisis and spur national efforts that can assist communities most in need.

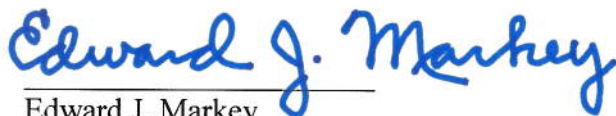
Such a report would help draw national attention to the impact of prescription drug and heroin abuse. This report would serve as a source of information on the science surrounding this issue, including trends, epidemiological data, and prescribing practices; and would assess the impacts that misuse and abuse of opioids has on the health of our citizens. Additionally, this report would help alert health professionals and consumers to the serious threat these drugs pose when abused or misused. We therefore urge you to have the Surgeon General commence and issue a report on the subject as soon as feasible.

In addition, we were encouraged to see your agency release an evidence-based and multi-pronged initiative aimed at reducing prescription opioid and heroin related overdose, death and dependence earlier this year. In light of our shared concern about the growing rate of misuse and abuse of opioids, as well as deaths associated with heroin and prescription painkillers, we write to better understand HHS's plan to measure the success of these recently-announced actions. In particular, we respectfully ask for your response to the following questions by close of business on June 12, 2015:

1. The initiative's stated goal is to deliver a measurable impact toward reducing opioid overdoses and the prevalence of opioid use disorders within two years. What metrics and strategy will be used to evaluate and report on progress made in each element of the initiative?
2. Data and reporting on overdose deaths lags, with the most recent nationwide reporting data being two years old. How does HHS plan on accurately measuring progress and identifying effective solutions to reduce overdose deaths given this significant lag in data and reporting?

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter. Should you have any questions about this request, please contact Dr. Avenel Joseph of Senator Markey's staff at 202-224-2721 or Jennifer Kuskowski of Senator McConnell's staff at 202-224-2541.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Mitch McConnell
United States Senator