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United States Senate

December 14, 2017

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The Honorable Jeff Sessions
Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20530

Dear Attorney General Sessions:

I write to gain a better understanding of role that the Department of Justice (DOJ) played in designing, funding, and supporting media campaigns intended to confront the rampant opioid overdoses that are plaguing communities across the country. In October, when President Donald Trump declared the opioid epidemic a public health emergency, he vowed that the federal government would start “a massive advertising campaign to get people, especially children, not to want to take drugs in the first place.”¹ However, I am concerned that ill-conceived and designed campaigns may prove to be harmful or counterproductive to our shared goal of combatting the ongoing epidemic.

Earlier this week, the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Boston, in collaboration with the New England Field Division of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), launched a Massachusetts-wide campaign focused on reducing opioid use, including prescription pain pills.² Almost immediately, many in the Massachusetts public health and medical communities criticized the images and rhetoric contained in this branded #ResistTheRisk initiative. They expressed concern that the advertising campaign utilizes scare tactics that have proven ineffective in changing behaviors or preventing young people from beginning to use drugs.³ These experts have warned that the use of some of the language and imagery in this campaign is not only medically inaccurate, but also stigmatizing and counterproductive. After years of working to bring opioid use disorders out of the shadows, it is imperative that any media campaigns refrain from using language or imagery that would further stigmatize these diseases.

Although education can serve as an important prevention tool that empowers youth and the general public to make healthy decisions, the wrong type of message can do more harm than good. To be fruitful, media campaigns must work in tandem with our comprehensive public

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/10/26/remarks-president-trump-combatting-drug-demand-and-opioid-crisis>

² <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/us-attorneys-office-and-dea-launch-opioid-abuse-prevention-public-awareness-campaign>

³ <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/11/29/new-ads-dangers-opioid-abuse-appear-mbta-buses-and-trains-this-month/E0N9gKdGIGljFUQtTVjzgO/story.html?event=event25>

health response to the opioid epidemic. The design and messaging of these campaigns should benefit from the input of public health and medical professionals who understand the language and demographics of the communities they serve.

Between 1998 and 2004, the U.S. government spent close to \$1 billion on a national campaign designed to discourage young people from using illegal drugs. Studies on the effectiveness of this national campaign found that, not only was it unsuccessful at positively affecting youth behavior, it may have unintentionally prompted some of its targets to experiment with drugs.⁴ Experts have since warned that prevention campaigns should avoid scare tactics that elicit only emotional reactions.⁵

As the Trump administration begins to design a nationwide campaign to fulfill the President's goal of preventing substance abuse, it is imperative that we not repeat the mistakes of the past. We must avoid launching campaigns elsewhere that mirror the #ResistTheRisk initiative in Massachusetts. I, therefore, respectfully ask that you respond to the following questions by no later than December 22, 2017:

1. What role did the DOJ have in designing, funding, or supporting the #ResistTheRisk campaign in Massachusetts? Is this campaign related to the president's public health emergency declaration and/or his nationwide campaign goal?
2. As the DOJ works to design, fund, or support other state-based campaigns or national campaigns, what steps will it take to avoid the concerns that have been raised with the #ResistTheRisk initiative?
3. How will the DOJ work to ensure that input from public health professionals is incorporated into any state-based or national campaign with which it is involved? In these efforts, will the DOJ consult with local public health professionals who understand the language and demographics of communities the campaigns target?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. I stand ready to work with you and others in the Administration to reduce the number of opioid overdoses, improve health outcomes and recovery rates, and protect our communities from the scourge of opioid use disorders.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey

⁴ Hornik, Robert et al. "Effects of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign on Youths." *American Journal of Public Health* 98.12 (2008): 2229–2236. *PMC*. Web. 7 Dec. 2017.

⁵ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/factcheck/ct-fact-check-anti-drug-campaigns-20171027-story.html>