



Sessions renews fight against opioids amid skepticism

Kari Travis

April 18, 2018

RALEIGH — It's time to get aggressive in the fight against opioid addiction, said U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions during a Raleigh presentation on the nationwide opioid crisis.

Sessions, the nation's top law-enforcement officer, is a longstanding crusader in the war on drugs. Now he faces greater conflict with President Trump, who last week announced he would support states' rights to regulate marijuana without federal interference. And while the embattled attorney general believes harsher policies will prevent overproduction and excessive prescription of opioids, some experts counter that a government crackdown on drug makers and doctors could have negative consequences.

The Drug Enforcement Administration is proposing new limits on pill production. DEA officials should be able to block opioid production if they think a company's drugs are being diverted for misuse, Sessions told law enforcers and reporters during his Tuesday, April 17, speech at the U.S. attorney's office in Raleigh.

Sessions did not take questions from reporters.

The proposed policy would give DEA agents access to information from the Department of Health and Human Services, the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Medicare, and Medicaid, among others.

North Carolina's pill problems extend from mountains to coast. The state is home to four of the 25 worst cities for opioid abuse in the country. Wilmington is first and followed by Hickory, fifth; Jacksonville, 12th; and Fayetteville, 18th. Opioid-related deaths in North Carolina increased by 800 percent between 1996 and 2016, Sessions said. That adds up to three fatal overdoses every day.

"But we are not going to accept the status quo," he said. "We will not allow this to continue."

Local and federal law enforcers must work together to cut off excessive access to drugs, and 48 attorneys general — North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein included — have agreed to share prescription drug information with one another, Sessions said.

The DEA pulls in “80 million transaction reports every year from manufacturers and distributors of prescription drugs.” Most of that data comes from programs to monitor prescriptions.

Overprescribing is rampant, and directly correlates to overdoses, Sessions said. In 2016, 64,000 Americans lost their lives to drug overdoses. That’s enough people to fill Carter-Finley Stadium, he noted.

Sessions has assigned several prosecutors to investigate “opioid-related health care fraud” in North Carolina and Tennessee.

But overprescribing may not be the real problem, said Jeffrey Singer, an Arizona surgeon and senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

In some cases, Sessions’ enforcement-first approach may only make the situation worse, Singer told *Carolina Journal* during a 2017 interview. Cutting-off access to physician-supervised treatment often drives patients to the black market, where some forms of opiates are cheaper — and far more dangerous.

In 2015, more than half of the overdose deaths were caused by heroin, fentanyl, or some combination of the two, Singer said.

“There are people who are desperate. There are people who are turning to the illegal market. And in the illegal market, of course, you can’t be sure what’s in those drugs.”

“Crisis” is the wrong word to use when describing America’s opioid addiction problem, he said. Lawmakers tend to rush to solutions in times of chaos, which can be harmful.

“Yes, there’s a problem. There is a rise in overdoses from opioids, absolutely,” Singer said.

“Why are more and more people turning to mind altering drugs? There are probably multiple answers. But it’s not just prescribing opioids to patients in pain. That’s not what it is.”

So long as Session remains in office, the attorney general said Washington will maximize its leverage.

“We are going to keep arming you [law enforcement agencies] with the tools that you need to keep drugs out of this community. And we are going to keep up the pace,” he said.