



Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act has momentum, faces hurdles

Congress strikes agreement on “substance” of bill, but funding becomes political hot potato

July 7th – On average 128 Americans died from a lethal drug overdose each and every day in 2014. More than 60 percent of these overdose deaths involved opioids.¹ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that 78 Americans die every day due to an opioid overdose.

A Reuters Investigation this past December got the attention of Congress when it underscored “In America, a baby is born dependent on opioids every 19 minutes.”²

Policymakers are keenly aware that no family, community (rural or urban), or Congressional district is immune from addiction and tragedies linked to the epidemic.

Unlike earlier drug epidemics, however, policymakers are quick to stipulate that America “cannot arrest its way out of this epidemic” instead a multi-faceted approach - enlisting prevention, treatment, recovery, and enforcement strategies - is required.

The epidemic is ripping apart families and communities as the country is preparing for an important election where all the seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and just over a third of the 100 seats in the United States Senate are up for grabs. 24 of the 34 U.S. Senate seats on the November ballot are currently held by Republicans. Democrats are eager to win just under a handful of those seats and take control of the Senate.

[Ryan Grim of The Huffington Post wrote](#) that passing a comprehensive opioid focused bill “is perhaps the highest campaign priority of Senate Republicans.”³ In May, a New York Times story ran with this headline “[Some Congressional Republicans See Re-election Path in Opioid Bills.](#)”

Many of the seats Democrats help to wrestle away from Republicans are in states particularly devastated by the opioid epidemic. Pennsylvania’s own race for the United States Senate has triggered [a steady stream of scolding press releases from Democrats](#) against incumbent Senator Pat Toomey’s votes related to funding for a comprehensive approach to the opioid epidemic.⁴

¹ <http://www.asam.org/docs/default-source/advocacy/opioid-addiction-disease-facts-figures.pdf>

² <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/baby-opioids/>

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/senate-democrats-heroin-funding_us_577d07d4e4b04164641136f3

⁴ <http://www.dscc.org/press-release/senator-toomey-votes-funding-address-opioid-crisis/>

And so there is this hearty dose of irony - it is hard to find many members of Congress that disagree with the “substance” of [S. 524 – the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act \(CARA\)](#) even as there are tons of political calculations at play impacting whether the bill ever reaches President Obama’s desk.

The sticking point is funding both the amount of funding (President Obama is stipulating that at least \$1.1 billion more is needed) and how such funding materializes (e.g., emergency or through the regular often stalled appropriations process).

Wednesday marked a day where so many ironies were on full display. There was the advancement of S. 524 through a rarely utilized conference committee. The resulting bill was negotiated with strong input from bipartisan leaders in the U.S. House and Senate and contents of this negotiated bill reflects a tapestry of independent bills woven together.⁵ Everything about getting to S. 524 has been pretty bipartisan. And again Wednesday, there was lots of common ground and shared language from Republicans and Democrats.

And then there was the political divide – the lines in the sand depending whether there is an R or a D behind the elected officials’ name. There was the decision by Democrats on the conference committee to champion the contents of S. 524, but then refuse to put their name on the final product. The withheld signatures were more than symbolic, they were another signal that President Obama and Democrats are not retreating from characterizing S. 524 as solid on policy but wholly inadequate on funding.

It was a day for digging in heels, offering competing press releases and getting the smartest political hired guns to calculate the political risk – to one or both parties this November – if S. 524 is derailed or killed along with the little bit of hope it offers to families, communities and states battling the scourge of opioid addiction.

Even on funding there is agreement - more is needed

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⁵ <http://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20160704/CRPT-114HRPT-S524.pdf>