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Wolf to White House: Don't Impede Progress on Addiction Crisis

Harrisburg, PA – Governor Tom Wolf today wrote White House Senior Advisor Jared Kushner to express concern over the White House's embrace of the American Health Care Act and the devastating impact the House-passed bill would have on the heroin crisis and treatment for those with substance use disorder. According to various reports, Mr. Kushner is heading the administration's efforts around the national heroin and opioid epidemic.

Governor Wolf will discuss the letter and his concerns at 2:45pm today. The event will be streamed live [here](#).

"I have spent the last two years traveling across Pennsylvania having dozens of discussions with those on the front lines of this crisis – people in recovery, parents in mourning, law enforcement, and health professionals," Governor Wolf wrote. "The message from them is clear: we need to combat stigma and get more people into treatment. My approach has been to attack this epidemic from [all angles](#): more treatment, more resources for law enforcement, more resources and education for health professionals, more restrictions on prescribing opioids, and many other steps to try to save lives.

"Many of these efforts have been supported by federal programs and funding. While we have started to make progress, there is so much more to do. That is why I write to you with deep and serious concerns about how the White House has approached recent policy debates that impact how we work towards curbing the death and destruction being caused by heroin and opioids."

Governor Wolf also extended an open invitation for Mr. Kushner to visit Pennsylvania and see the commonwealth's crisis and response firsthand.

"Thousands of our kids, siblings, neighbors and friends are dying in Pennsylvania," Governor Wolf wrote. "We need the federal government to be a partner – not an adversary – in battling this epidemic from all angles."

The American Health Care Act includes ending Medicaid expansion, which has helped more than 125,000 Pennsylvanians get access to substance use treatment, and even deeper cuts to Medicaid, which would put even more treatment programs, particularly for county agencies, at risk.

Further, the House bill would put consumer protections for people with substance use disorder at risk, by allowing states – and, in turn, possibly national employers – to opt-out of protections for pre-existing conditions and essential health benefits, including treatment.

The full text of the letter is below.

Dear Mr. Kushner,

According to various reports, you have been tapped to spearhead the administration's efforts to combat the heroin and opioid epidemic ravaging our country, particularly my state of Pennsylvania, which has lost thousands of our residents to the tragedy of addiction.

I have spent the last two years traveling across Pennsylvania having dozens of discussions with those on the front lines of this crisis – people in recovery, parents in mourning, law enforcement, and health professionals. The message from them is clear: we need to combat stigma and get more people into treatment.

My approach has been to attack this epidemic from all angles: more treatment, more resources for law enforcement, more resources and education for health professionals, more restrictions on prescribing opioids, and many other steps to try to save lives.

Many of these efforts have been supported by federal programs and funding. While we have started to make progress, there is so much more to do.

That is why I write to you with deep and serious concerns about how the White House has approached recent policy debates that impact how we work towards curbing the death and destruction being caused by heroin and opioids.

First and foremost, the administration's enthusiastic embrace of health care repeal and replace that includes deep cuts to Medicaid, the end of Medicaid expansion, and putting essential health benefits, including substance use and mental health treatment, at risk, will all set the fight against opioid addiction at serious risk. We should be investing more in treatment – not less.

In Pennsylvania, more than 125,000 residents have accessed treatment services under just Medicaid expansion – and hundreds of thousands more do through traditional Medicaid. You must understand – these are people who otherwise could not afford treatment and therefore will be left with nowhere to turn to fight their addiction – a medical disease.

The deal cut with the Freedom Caucus to allow states to opt out of essential health benefits and pre-existing condition protections would further the stigma and challenge for those suffering from substance use disorder. Substance abuse would now be a pre-existing condition and health insurance may not be required to cover treatment. What message does that send to those suffering?

Thousands of our kids, siblings, neighbors and friends are dying in Pennsylvania. We need the federal government to be a partner – not an adversary – in battling this epidemic from all angles.

I implore you to reverse course and lead the President towards a more sensible strategy. I would invite you to visit Pennsylvania any time to learn more about both how this epidemic is affecting people and how we're trying to help.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

TOM WOLF

Governor