Statement of the Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey

Executive Director Angelo M. Valente

Senate Health, Human Services, and Senior Citizens Committee

February 4, 2015

Good Afternoon.

Thank you for the invitation to provide testimony regarding the status of the opiate abuse epidemic to the Senate Health, Human Services, and Senior Citizens Committee.

The leadership of this Committee, led by Senator Vitale, and the support of your colleagues in advancing legislation to stem the tide of the opiate abuse epidemic that continues to ravage our state have made a positive impact in helping to educate our communities about opiate abuse, the need to prevent abuse of opiate products and create broader access to treatment.

The introduction of the 21 Bill Package in the last legislative session brought unprecedented media attention to the epidemic, and with it awareness about prescription drug and heroin abuse. This awareness is vital in educating the residents of our state about the rates of abuse, the link between prescribed medicines and heroin abuse and the accessibility of naloxone.

Because prescription drugs are safe and effective when used properly, the notion that they are also harmful and addictive when abused can be a difficult one to convey, however, great strides have been made by the Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey to get the message out to our State’s residents to make them more aware of the medicines they have been prescribed.

Educating parents and patients about the signs and symptoms of opiate abuse and the link between prescribed medicines and heroin abuse is the centerpiece of the Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey’s 2016 efforts. Simultaneously, the Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey continues its focus on educating physicians about safer prescribing through a series of educational Do No Harm symposiums. The efforts we have made here in New Jersey have gained the recognition of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, which included the Do No Harm symposiums in their 2015 Strategy Report as a Best Practice. These events demonstrated the potentially life-saving benefits of additional physician education on this issue of opiate prescribing as outlined in Assembly Bill 1549.

As you may already be aware, The CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control recently signed off on a report by an external work group suggesting relatively minor changes to CDC's draft opioid guidelines. The draft guidelines offer additional opportunities to address the ongoing public health emergency. Specifically, recommendation number three suggests that before starting and periodically during opioid therapy, providers should discuss with patients known risks and realistic benefits of opioid therapy and patient and provider responsibilities for managing therapy, mirroring the intent of recently introduced Senate Bills 803 and 796.

The passage of the mandated Prescription Drug Monitoring Program was a timely acknowledgement of this critical public health emergency. Incorporating PMPs into a comprehensive prescription drug abuse prevention strategy that includes education for healthcare providers, patients, and the public on prescription drug abuse; consumer‐friendly, environmentally responsible medication‐disposal programs; and smart law enforcement aimed at reducing pill mills and doctor shopping, will reduce the scope of prescription drug abuse in New Jersey.

Last year’s passage of Senate Bill 2370 as part of the 21-bill package, which requires pharmacies and physicians to instruct patients on how to safely dispose of unused prescribed controlled dangerous substances, will also make a significant contribution in empowering parents and patients with information on how to safeguard their homes by safely disposing of their unused, unwanted and expired medicine. This bill reinforces the mandate of the American Medicine Chest Challenge, New Jersey’s prescription drug take-back initiative which was deemed a best practice by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy in 2010. Too many patients and parents in New Jersey are finding themselves addicted to the medicines they were prescribed by physicians because they did not know how potentially addictive they were and therefore were not aware of the consequences of not securing and disposing of these medicines nor were they aware of need to look for the signs and symptoms of abuse.

Together, with the efforts of this committee and the continuing introduction of innovative legislation to address the misuse and abuse of opiates on all fronts we will make significant strides in addressing this epidemic.