

Trump launches opioid commission amid mixed reviews

By Rachel Roubain – 03/30/17 5:20 AM ET

- Advocates want commission members to represent spectrum of substance abuse field.
- Continued funding is crucial to combating opioid epidemic.

President Trump's creation of a commission to curb the opioid epidemic received mixed reviews this week, and some advocates are pushing for members to include more than just public officials.

Gov. **Chris Christie** (R-N.J.), who was outspoken about the need to tackle the problem during his presidential campaign and has worked to fight it in his home state, will lead the effort and met at the White House with Trump and others Wednesday.

The executive order signed Wednesday states that the commission's membership will be "fairly balanced in terms of the points of view represented and the functions to be performed by the Commission."

The White House has not officially announced the commission's membership, and advocates hope those chosen represent the breadth of the prevention, treatment and recovery spectrum.

"I'm extremely hopeful that [Trump] will also select as part of the commission individuals who have run successful addiction treatment facilities," **Doug Tieman**, president and CEO of Caron Treatment Centers, said.

Others echoed the importance of appointing those in the substance abuse field and in recovery to the commission.

The hope — **Patty McCarthy Metcalf**, executive director of Faces and Voices of Recovery said — is that the commission represents addiction as a healthcare issue and not a criminal justice one.

Trump held a listening session on opioids Wednesday morning, which included more than a dozen attendees, such as cabinet secretaries, the head of the Drug Enforcement Agency, the founder of a recovery center and those in recovery.

During the presidential campaign, Trump promised to help combat the uptick in deaths from prescription painkillers and heroin, which have more than quadrupled since 1999. The epidemic has hit both rural and urban communities and has grabbed the attention of lawmakers, many of whom are seeing the crisis plague their states and districts.

Quickly, please.

“The big hope is that with a commission like this is that they move quickly, that this is a crisis that is happening across our country and that people are dying as we speak,” **Tom Hill**, vice president of addictions and recovery for the National Council for Behavioral Health, told *The Hill Extra*. “We would expect this commission to expedite things as quickly as possible and make informed and solid decisions that could be acted upon relatively quickly.”

Advocates hope this effort helps supplement the work Congress has done through last year’s passage of the bipartisan Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act.

“Figuring out what’s missing in the framework that we’ve already built I think is the key to moving forward,” **Jessica Nickel**, Addiction Policy Forum president, told *The Hill Extra*.

Others, though, want to see that Trump drops attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act, which would repeal Medicaid expansion and also possibly eliminate the requirement that insurers cover substance abuse treatment.

“There is a massive gulf between President Trump’s promises to tackle this crisis and the policies this administration has proposed during his first two months in office,” Sen. **Jeanne Shaheen** (D-N.H.) said in a statement. “The President just tried to repeal the Affordable Care Act, ending Medicaid expansion, which would have taken away substance misuse and mental health treatment from thousands of Granite Staters.”

"President Trump is planning to tout his commitment to tackling the addiction crisis and, specifically, the opioid epidemic in America," Protect Our Care Campaign Director **Leslie Dach** said in a statement. "If he's serious about it, the first thing he must do is announce he's abandoning efforts to undo the health care law — whether through repeal in Congress or sabotage in the administration — because of the damage it would do to our fight against these diseases and the harm it would do to millions battling the epidemic."

Funding.

Advocates stress that, no matter what the commission does, continued funding is needed to help support efforts to address the crisis.

The 21st Century Cures bill authorized \$500 million for fiscal 17 and another for fiscal 18 for states to fight the opioid epidemic.

The White House’s skinny budget included this money, and HHS Secretary **Tom Price** committed to continuing the funds Wednesday at a House Labor, Health and Human Services Appropriations Subcommittee hearing.

"HHS is investing efforts to combat opioid misuse, increase availability of treatment and reduce deaths from overdoses," Price said. "Those investments include continuing the \$500 million in funding provided by the 21st Century Cures Act."

Appropriating the money “shouldn’t be a problem,” the subcommittee’s chairman, Rep. **Tom Cole** (R-Okla.) said.

Two lawmakers are leading the charge to call for funding for the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act. The Bipartisan Heroin Task Force co-chairs, Reps. **Annie Kuster** (D-N.H.) and **Tom MacArthur** (R-N.J.), spearheaded a letter with more than 60 signatures calling for \$180 million.

“As you begin consideration of the FY2018 appropriations bill, we hope that you will recognize the significance of the epidemic in our midst and support the comprehensive framework of CARA,” the co-chairs wrote to relevant appropriators. “Doing so would provide the resources and incentives necessary for states and local governments to expand treatment, prevention, and recovery efforts for the millions of Americans who are affected by addiction.”

Kat Lucero and Nathaniel Weixel contributed.