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AG Sessions delivers one-two punch in opioid crisis



President Donald Trump listens as Attorney General Jeff Sessions speaks in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, after Vice President Mike Pence administered the oath of office to Sessions. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais) *(Staff and wire reports)*

By **Guest Voices**

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By Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall

Caught in the collateral damage of the President's comments last week regarding his selection of Attorney General Jeff Sessions is the media's failure to report on, and thus the public's failure to fully appreciate, the significant strides the Justice Department has already made in battling the opioid crisis under Sessions' leadership.

If you've been following the Department at all over the past few months, it is undeniable that Attorney General Sessions is delivering on every priority he laid out in his first week of office--this, despite operating with a still-incomplete staff. I can think of no U.S. Attorney General in my lifetime, or any cabinet member for that matter, who can tout as much tangible success during their first few months on the job.

On July 13, the Justice Department announced a nationwide health care fraud takedown in which charges were filed against over 400 individuals. From that group, 120 medical professionals and pharmacists were charged in connection with the distribution of opioids. Collectively, the effort is considered to be "the largest ever health care enforcement action in the Justice Department's history." Just seven days later, Attorney General Sessions delivered even more good news on the opioid front: the largest dark web market for illegal drugs, AlphaBay, was exposed and broken up. In his remarks announcing the takedown, he noted the website's connection to the opioid epidemic--there were at least 122 vendors selling fentanyl and 238 vendors selling heroin through this marketplace, with direct connections to the deaths of Americans from all over the country. Sessions worked with international partners to accomplish this feat, which will undoubtedly have a considerable chilling effect on the buying and selling of synthetic opioids online.

These successes are being widely celebrated in my office and in Alabama's law enforcement community. While the opioid problems we face as a state and nation do not fall solely within the domain of law enforcement, there *is* a critical role for law enforcement that policy conversations at the national level have sometimes downplayed in recent years. As Attorney General Sessions rightly recognizes, law enforcement is at the front lines of the opioid fight when it comes to pill mills, unlawful distribution, fraud, trafficking, and opioid-related violent crime. Not only that, but the criminal justice system can be utilized in innovative and effective ways to serve addicts whose lives are saved by law enforcement intervention, supervision, and accountability.

I've spent a great deal of time in my first few months in office meeting with local, state, and federal stakeholders to determine the best path forward for dealing with the opioid crisis in our state. Certainly, the privilege of having access to a fellow Alabamian at the head of the Justice Department is invaluable in this effort. But I also know that we have to develop our own Alabama-specific solutions for the opioid crisis as it exists here at home. And it *is* a crisis.

Recent reports show that Alabama deaths caused by Fentanyl--a particularly deadly form of heroin--increased 100 percent over the course of one year. The number of individuals seeking treatment for heroin abuse from our Department of Mental Health increased 62 percent over the same period. In nearly 70 percent of Alabama counties, ER admissions for Narcan--the lifesaving drug administered in opioid overdoses--have also increased. And in 2015, Alabama was recognized as the state with the highest number of opioid prescriptions per capita.

When it comes to dealing with the most pressing criminal justice issues of our time--be it opioids, violent crime, or community relations with law enforcement--there is no better man for the job than Jeff Sessions. We all need to take pride in his ascendancy to this honorable position, but even more so, in the many fruits of his labor of which we are fortunate enough to be the beneficiaries. Don't get distracted by the media's tendency to report only on the negative--Attorney General Sessions is aggressively getting the job done. The best part is that he's just getting started.

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