

Speeches about the opioid epidemic won't make it go away



This Tuesday, Aug. 15, 2017 photo shows an arrangement of pills of the opioid oxycodone-acetaminophen in New York. (AP Photo/Patrick Sison) (Patrick Sison)



By **Clete Wetli**

on October 31, 2017 at 12:20 PM, updated October 31, 2017 at 12:22 PM

Clete Wetli is a liberal political activist living in Huntsville and a regular contributor to AL.com. Email Clete at decaturclete@gmail.com or visit cletewetli.com.

In the surreal midst of the media circus surrounding Russia probe indictments, Weinstein sexual allegations, and chaotic partisan efforts to give tax cuts to the rich, it's important to note that 145 Americans are dying every single day from drug overdoses, mostly from opioids. Trump promised to take decisive action to address the crisis and he has fallen abysmally short.

His speech, that echoed the "Just Say No" mantra of the ineffectual War on Drugs, and his glaring failure to ask for more funding for substance abuse treatment shows that Trump has no practical or serious plan to deal with addiction in America. Trump and his Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, are making a huge and costly mistake engaging in the same mass incarceration and drug interdiction strategies that only exacerbated the substance abuse problem in our country over the last forty years.

This shouldn't be a partisan issue. More American citizens have died of opioid overdoses than died during the Vietnam War. People with legitimate prescriptions become addicts the same way as folks who are just looking to get high. One pill at a time. It doesn't care who you voted for, how much money you make, or about your skin color.

Trump should take a page out of Alabama Republican Governor Kay Ivey's book. She, too, convened an opioid task force, but the difference is that it's starting to shape state policy because her administration is taking the findings seriously and acting on them. The Alabama Court system is finally ready to acknowledge that evidence-based medication assisted treatments, like methadone and suboxone, are effective and that they reduce recidivism.

People are finally paying attention to the volumes of public research available from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration that show treating addiction is less costly and more effective than simply throwing addicts in jail. People are beginning to understand that addiction is, genuinely and medically, a disease. No one is saying that addicts shouldn't face the consequences of criminal activities that they may perpetrate, but professionals are saying that they need effective treatment to stop the cycle of crime and death.

For too long, America has tried a one-size-fits-all approach to substance abuse. We've spent billions on building more prisons and turning local law enforcement into para-military outfits. Obviously, it hasn't worked and it's not working now. We've got to understand the difference between marijuana and methamphetamine. We've got to figure out the difference between people who have legitimate long-term chronic pain and those who just want a buzz. We have to stop the stigmatization and the stereotyping. One hundred and forty-five Americans are dying every day until we try an approach that works.

Yes, doctors and pharmaceutical companies bear responsibility in this crisis. But, let's not make it impossible for people with legitimate conditions to get the medicine they need. Also, let's not cease our efforts to punish drug dealers and stop the flow of illegal drugs into our country. Having said that, we must desperately increase the funding we need for substance abuse and mental health treatment.

Believe it or not, this is one problem where throwing more money at it will actually make a positive difference. Too many people lack access to treatment or simply can't afford it. Also, there are arcane Medicaid and private insurance rules that prevent people from getting help; like refusing to pay for treatment in a facility that has more than 16 beds or demanding that treatment be complete in just 28 days.

We need less speeches and more action. Without funding, the death toll will rise again tomorrow.

Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our **User Agreement** and **Privacy Policy**

© 2017 Alabama Media Group. All rights reserved (**About Us**).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Alabama Media Group.

Community Rules apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.

 **Ad Choices**