

Opening Statement  
Chairman Mark Souder

“Facing the Methamphetamine Problem in America”

Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy,  
and Human Resources  
Committee on Government Reform

July 18, 2003

Good morning, and thank you all for coming. This hearing continues our effort to highlight federal responses to the problem of methamphetamine abuse. The problem most visibly has manifested itself locally in towns and rural areas across the country. But the array of meth-related problems, from small labs nationwide to so-called “super labs” in California, to the environmental consequences, to the social toll and cost of addiction, clearly are a significant national problem that requires increasing federal attention. Today we will consider how the federal government can best support efforts to control and prevent the abuse of methamphetamines across the country.

Meth is among the most powerful and dangerous stimulants available. The drug is highly addictive and has multiple side effects, including psychotic behavior, physical deterioration and brain damage, and carries a high risk of death by overdose. Unfortunately, it is also relatively easy to produce from common household chemicals and cold medicines.

The growth of the meth problem in the last decade, both in the number of addicts and the number of areas affected, has been particularly severe. What was once primarily a regional problem, concentrated mainly in southern and central California, has now spread across most of the U.S. Today, nearly every state and every

Congressional district has been forced to grapple with meth trafficking and abuse.

Meth comes from two major sources of supply. Most is produced in the “superlabs” in California and northern Mexico, which have accounted for over 70 percent of the nation’s supply. The superlabs are operated by large Mexican drug cartels and outlaw motorcycle gangs that have used their established distribution networks to move meth throughout the country. These organizations import huge quantities of precursor chemicals like pseudoephedrine from Canada – a practice made necessary by tougher U.S. penalties against precursor diversion and effective enforcement by DEA and other law enforcement agencies.

The second major source of meth comes from small, local labs unaffiliated with major trafficking organizations. These labs have proliferated throughout the country, especially in rural areas. DEA reports that over 7,700 of 8,000 clandestine labs seized in 2001 were these smaller labs. The total amount of meth actually supplied by these labs is relatively small. The environmental damage and health hazard they create, however, make them a serious problem for local communities.

The federal government has already taken significant and effective action against the meth problem. The widespread growth of the problem, however, has spurred calls for further action. Most proposals have focused on the need to assist local law enforcement in finding and cleaning up the numerous small meth labs. A well-balanced approach, however, will have to address both the smaller labs and the major traffickers.

At the federal level DEA and other agencies will continue to take the lead in disrupting and dismantling the organizations behind the superlabs, in close cooperation with such state agencies as the California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement, which has also played a leading and significant role in this area. These agencies need support and assistance, however, from additional state and local law enforcement to be truly effective. The High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) program is designed to foster this kind of cooperative effort against drug trafficking. HIDTA-funded initiatives have already

targeted many of the major superlabs and the distribution networks affiliated with them. This should continue to be a priority for the HIDTA program within the context of other national trafficking priorities.

Although the smaller labs do not have the same national impact on meth supply as the superlabs, the damage they cause is more widespread and is a significant concern that requires careful attention. The federal government must continue to explore how best to assist states and localities in finding and cleaning up these dangerous sites. Because the purpose of the HIDTA program is to reduce the national supply of drugs and not to deal primarily with local problems, a more inclusive and locally focused program is needed.

One proposal, offered by our colleague Congressman Ose, provides for a broad range of initiatives aimed at the meth problem. Among other things, HR 834 would provide funds to help states and localities find and clean up meth labs, including expanding assistance under the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grant program. Additional resources for treatment and prevention at the local level are also made available. I am a co-sponsor of this bill and strongly support it.

This hearing will address potential solutions to the difficult issues surrounding the meth problem. I am pleased to welcome two of my colleagues, Congressman John Boozman of Arkansas and Congressman Ed Case of Hawaii, both of whom have taken a strong leadership role in the fight against meth. To help us further discuss the federal government's response, we are also pleased to be joined today by Mr. Roger Guevara, Chief of Operations for the Drug Enforcement Administration, and Mr. John Horton, Associate Deputy Director for State and Local Affairs at the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

At the same time, it is also important for us to hear from the state and local agencies forced to fight on the "front lines" against meth and other illegal drugs. We welcome Captain William Kelly, Commander of the Narcotics Division of the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department; Chief Brian Martinek of the Vancouver,

Washington Police Department; and Sheriff Barry Lucas of the Clark County, Washington Sheriff's Office. We thank everyone for taking the time to join us this morning, and look forward to your testimony.