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FIGHTING SUBSTANCE ABUSE

“On my travels throughout West Virginia, I have heard the same thing again and again – drug abuse is tearing our communities apart, damaging our workforce, hurting our schools and destroying our families. This is more than a problem, it is an epidemic we need to fight right away. If we want to improve our economy and keep West Virginia competitive by attracting residents and businesses, the scourge of drug abuse in our communities is something we must confront with the full force of our efforts.”

-Senator Joe Manchin

Drug abuse has reached a crisis point in West Virginia, which now suffers from the highest rate of drug overdose deaths in the country – with nearly 90 percent of those fatalities linked to prescription drug abuse. Whether drugs come from “pill mills” that flood the market with prescription drugs, bath salts sold on the shelves or synthetic marijuana, the problem is becoming national in scope and state and federal leaders must work together to fix it.

On his travels in West Virginia, Senator Manchin has heard about the problem of drug abuse from local business leaders, law enforcement officials, educators and families in community after community. Drugs are robbing our children of positive role models, and employers are having trouble filling jobs and staying competitive.

Senator Manchin has proposed a three-point, commonsense anti-drug abuse strategy that includes measures to combat drug abuse at the federal level, including banning bath salts and synthetic marijuana and increasing penalties for running “pill mills.”

Commonsense Idea: Stopping Pill Mills:

Senator Manchin has introduced the Pill Mill Crackdown Act of 2011, S. 1760, with Senator Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), which corresponds with a similar bill in the U.S. House of Representatives. The bipartisan legislation would significantly increase penalties (including prison terms and fines) for pill mill operators and make hydrocodone combination drugs more difficult to obtain.

Specifically, the bill would:

- Toughen federal penalties for “pill mill” operators by doubling the prison sentence from 10 to 20 years and tripling the fine from \$1 million to \$3 million;
- Use seized assets to: fund drug monitoring databases in the states, fund Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) enforcement actions against pill mills, and support drug treatment programs within the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration;
- Reclassify hydrocodone combination drugs (some of the most easily obtainable and addictive prescription drugs) to make them Schedule II drugs, which are more difficult to prescribe and obtain.

Commonsense Idea: Banning Bath Salts:

In the last two years, there has also been a drastic increase in the manufacture and recreational use of substances that are sold as “bath salts,” substances are meant to mimic illegal drugs like cocaine. Recognizing the danger posed by these substances, the Drug Enforcement Administration announced on October 21, 2011 a temporary designation for “bath salts” as controlled substances for 12-18 months. While some states have also taken action against bath salts, there is no federal law to make them illegal.



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Senator Manchin has cosponsored legislation that would make the sale and distribution of dangerous substances found in fake bath salts illegal across the nation by adding them to the list of Schedule I controlled substances under the Controlled Substances Act. **S. 409, the Combating Dangerous Synthetic Stimulants Act**, would put a permanent, national ban on “mephedrone” and “MDPV” found in fake bath salts. **The legislation has passed the Senate Judiciary Committee and is awaiting action by the full Senate.**

Commonsense Idea: Eliminating Synthetic Drugs:

Synthetic marijuana is generally produced by spraying dried plants with various chemical compounds, resulting in a potent high similar to that of cocaine, methamphetamines, or LSD. The drug can cause intense seizures, along with hallucinations and suicidal thoughts. This type of fake drug is particularly dangerous because they have been available over-the-counter, and users therefore tend to underestimate their powerful effects. The Drug Enforcement Administration also announced a temporary designation for “bath salts” as controlled substances for 12-18 months on October 21, 2011.

Senator Manchin has cosponsored legislation that would make the sale and distribution of the dangerous substances found in fake marijuana illegal by adding them to the list of Schedule I controlled substances under the Controlled Substances Act. **S. 605, the Dangerous Synthetic Drug Control Act**, would put a national ban on cannabimimetic agents, or synthetic substances that imitate marijuana. **The legislation has passed the Senate Judiciary Committee and is awaiting action by the full Senate.**

Statistics on Drug Abuse in West Virginia:

- In 2008, the latest year for which data is available, 390 West Virginians died from accidental overdoses involving prescription drugs, according to the state Health Statistics Center. In 2001, 91 West Virginians died from accidental prescription drug overdoses.
- West Virginia has the nation’s highest rate of drug deaths. Between 2001 and 2008, more than nine out of 10 of those deaths involved prescription drugs (Charleston Gazette, January 15, 2011).
- Drug overdoses now kill more West Virginians each year than car accidents do. Drug overdoses are the leading cause of accidental deaths in the state (Charleston Gazette, January 15, 2011).
- Between 2001 and 2008, the statewide death rate of overdoses involving prescription drugs more than quadrupled, from 5.1 deaths per 100,000 residents to 21.5 (Charleston Gazette, January 15, 2011).
- According to a report by the West Virginia Prevention Resource Center, the direct total cost of substance abuse on the criminal justice system has risen significantly since 2006, when the cost was \$272.4 million. In 2008, it was \$318.2 million before it rose to \$429.7 million in 2010.
- In Charleston this year, the number of motorists driving under the influence of drugs surpassed the number of those driving under the influence of alcohol, according to the Charleston Daily Mail. About 700 people have been arrested for DUI-related incidents this year in Charleston, and about 70 percent of those were on something other than alcohol. Last year, Charleston officers saw more of a 50-50 split.