

Trump's pick for drug czar forced to step down after expose

Genevieve Leigh
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Republican Representative Tom Marino from Pennsylvania has withdrawn his name from consideration as the United States' next Drug Czar, the director of federal drug control policy, after a damning report exposed his role in pushing through legislation dismantling regulations on prescription opioid drugs.

The joint investigation by the *Washington Post* and 60 Minutes revealed a bipartisan effort to effectively take away the power of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to suspend drug distributors suspected of funneling prescription drugs onto the black market. Mariano spearheaded the effort which resulted in the Ensuring Patient Access and Effective Drug Enforcement Act in 2016, which passed unanimously in Congress and was signed into law by then President Barack Obama.

The bill targeted the DEA's Office of Diversion Control, which is a department meant to monitor the flow of prescription drugs from the major US pharmaceutical companies to distributors such as hospitals and pharmacies. As prescription opioid abuse was exploding throughout the country the Office of Diversion Control began to freeze drug shipments for unusually large and unexplained sales.

The main function of the Marino's legislation was to modify the language of the standard for identifying dangers to society, from "imminent" threats to "immediate" threats. The change makes it virtually impossible for the DEA to suspend drug companies that do not report obscenely large orders for narcotics.

The investigation used evidence from whistleblowers who formerly worked in the DEA. One of the primary sources was Joe Rannazzisi, a former high-ranking DEA official, who told reporters, "This is an industry that allowed millions and millions of drugs to go into bad pharmacies and doctors' offices that distributed

them out to people who had no legitimate need for those drugs." Rannazzisi was forced to retire in 2015.

One example highlighted in the investigation showed that a drug distribution company shipped 20 million doses of oxycodone and hydrocodone (both powerful opioids) to pharmacies in West Virginia between 2007 and 2012. This included 11 million doses to one small county in a southern region of the state with only 25,000 people. Before the campaign to disarm the DEA was well under way in 2014, the Office of Diversion Control would have had the power to immediately suspend the shipment of the drugs, preventing them from getting to the street, and launch an investigation.

Despite overwhelming evidence of drug mills popping up throughout the country, one of the high-level officials who played a key role in pushing through the final version of the bill, Republican Senator Orrin Hatch from Utah, stated that they were instead "concerned about DEA's unfettered enforcement authority."

The concern of Hatch and Mariano over "enforcement authority" comes at a time of unprecedented drug abuse in US history. Recent reports indicate that 143 Americans are dying each day from drug overdose, and over 30,000 of the 50,000 overdoses each year are from a drug in the opioid family. It is estimated that over 2.1 million people in the United States are suffering from substance use disorders which are directly related to prescription opioid pain relievers.

The concerns within Washington lay with the financial interest of the pharmaceutical companies.

The *Washington Post*/60 Minutes investigation also revealed that political action committees representing the pharmaceutical industry and their distributors contributed at least \$1.5 million to the 23 lawmakers

who sponsored or co-sponsored four versions of the bill, including nearly \$100,000 to Marino and \$177,000 to Hatch. Between 2014, when the campaign against the DEA started, and 2016, when the law was passed, the drug industry spent \$102 million lobbying Congress on the bill and related matters.

President Trump tweeted Tuesday, “Rep. Tom Marino has informed me that he is withdrawing his name from consideration as drug czar. Tom is a fine man and a great Congressman!” Marino’s “stepping down” was prompted by public relations calculations over the fallout from the investigation, not because of the sordid details unveiled by the investigation itself.

It was Marino’s ruthless defense of the pharmaceutical companies’ financial interests that made him a prime candidate for the job of Drug Czar in the first place. Had the report not been released, Marino would have joined the ranks of Betsy DeVos at the Department of Education, Ryan Zinke at the Department of the Interior and Scott Pruitt at the Environmental Protection Agency-- all figures appointed, in Orwellian fashion, to oversee the destruction of their departments and boost the profits of big business.

During the presidential campaign, Trump promoted a national plan to combat the growing opioid epidemic. This was a key selling point in some of the areas through the so-called Rust Belt in the Midwest where Trump won in large numbers. The states in this region, which was ravaged by deindustrialization, have subsequently been some of the hardest hit by the opioid crisis.

Trump reasserted that he is “committed” to the issue in the wake of the investigation. He announced on Tuesday that he will make "a major announcement, probably next week, on the drug crisis."

While Marino is now out of the running for the Drug Czar position, there should be no illusions among workers and youth who are concerned with drug abuse that any political figure tapped by the Trump administration will be able or willing to do anything to stem the murderous epidemic.



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