

Trump declares opioid epidemic “will get worse before it gets better”

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Effectively washing his hands of any responsibility for the opioid crisis devastating the United States, President Donald Trump declined Thursday to declare a national emergency, which would unlock resources for helping addicts and saving lives. Instead he declared a “public health emergency,” a purely cosmetic gesture that does not free up a single dollar to deal with the plague of drug addiction that caused some 64,000 deaths last year.

In one of the most cynical performances of an administration steeped in cynical lying, Trump staged a nationally televised event around his non-declaration of a national emergency. It featured his wife Melania introducing him with remarks about the suffering she had seen on a few visits to hospitals and treatment centers.

Trump made grandiose promises. “We cannot allow this to continue,” he said. “It is time to liberate our communities from this scourge of drug addiction.” But he voiced the real indifference of US billionaires to this social tragedy, declaring flatly that the opioid crisis “would get worse before it gets better.”

If the matter is left up to the Trump administration and the Democrats and Republicans in Congress, only the first part of that statement will prove true: the crisis will indeed “get worse,” but no improvement can be expected under conditions of mounting poverty, low wages, and mass unemployment and underemployment, the driving forces of the social crisis that has produced an epidemic of drug abuse.

As in many other areas of policy, the former reality television star expressed the belief that a better public relations campaign would do the trick in terms of preventing people, particularly the youth, from becoming addicted to powerful opioid drugs. He claimed that the federal government would develop

“really tough, really big, really great advertising” aimed at persuading Americans not to start using opioids in the first place. “This was an idea that I had, where if we can teach young people not to take drugs,” he said, “it’s really, really easy not to take them.”

While Trump falsely claims credit for originality, the notion that government propaganda can hold back the tide of drug abuse was promoted some 35 years ago by a previous reactionary occupant of the White House, First Lady Nancy Reagan, whose pathetic “Just say no” campaign flooded the public airwaves during the crack epidemic without having the slightest impact. Then, as now, the goal was to seem to be doing something about a public health disaster, while avoiding any effort to address the actual causes of the crisis, or to provide any resources to actually assist the victims.

In similar fashion, there was not a hint at the lavishly produced White House spectacle Thursday about what is driving millions of people, mainly in the working class, to begin taking highly addictive pain medications. There was not a word about the giant pharmaceutical manufacturers and drug distribution companies which are responsible for pumping these drugs into working class neighborhoods, especially economically devastated areas like Appalachia, rural New England, and the deindustrialized cities of the Midwest and upper South, generating enormous profits.

Only last week, Trump’s nominee for “drug czar,” Representative Tom Marino, had to withdraw after a major exposé by the *Washington Post* and “60 Minutes” revealed his role in drafting legislation that barred the Drug Enforcement Administration from cracking down on suspicious mass shipments of opioids by the major drug distributors to the former coal mining areas of southern West Virginia.

Tom Price, Trump’s secretary of Health and Human

Services, was forced to resign last month over extensive taxpayer-paid junkets on private jets to conferences and resorts—none of them in Appalachia or other regions hard-hit by opioid abuse. One of Price's last acts as secretary was to join with Trump's budget director, Mick Mulvaney, to oppose the declaration of a national emergency in the opioid crisis, because it would obligate the federal government to spend real money.

The presidential commission Trump appointed to study the opioid crisis, headed by New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, recommended in its report delivered in August that he declare a national emergency. But Trump eventually decided not to do so because, according to press accounts, budget officials attacked the proposal as too expensive.

The only actual effect of the declaration of a public health emergency is to make available funds from a sorely depleted Public Health Emergency Fund at the Department of Health and Human Services that currently contains only \$57,000, less than one dollar for each death from opioid overdoses in 2016. The White House claimed that additional money could be provided in budget appropriations legislation for the current fiscal year, which is not expected to pass Congress until the end of December. In the meantime, there will be little or nothing in terms of new resources.

While there is some muttering in Congress about the failure of the White House to propose any significant new funding to deal with the crisis, neither Democrats nor Republicans support the type of massive outlays that are required—and which would be provided rapidly to Wall Street in the event of a financial market crisis, and which are being provided continuously to the Pentagon, the Department of Homeland Security and the intelligence agencies.

One public health advocacy group estimated that \$60 billion over 10 years would be required—a sum that is less than 1 percent of what the Pentagon will spend over the same period in the endless wars to maintain the global domination of the US ruling class.

The opioid crisis is killing an average of 140 Americans each day. The 59,000 who died last year from opioid overdoses is greater than the number of American soldiers killed in the Vietnam War over a 14-year span. Meanwhile, states and cities are running out of money to provide even emergency antidotes like

naloxone and Narcan, which revive overdose victims and have saved countless lives. Drug overdoses are now the leading cause of death for people under 50 years of age.



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