

Trump demands death penalty for drug dealers as answer to opioid overdose crisis

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Speaking at an event in Manchester, New Hampshire Monday, President Donald Trump announced his administration's law-and-order initiative in response to the US overdose epidemic, the centerpiece of which is his push for the death penalty for convicted drug dealers.

The reactionary proposal opens the gruesome prospect of thousands of Americans being marched to the nation's death chambers, as many addicts often sell drugs in order to fund their habit or out of desperate need for money.

More than 64,000 people nationwide died of a drug overdose in 2016, triple the number in 1999 and higher than the number of deaths at the peak of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Reports indicate that the numbers will be even higher for 2017 and 2018. At least 65 percent of overdoses involve an opioid.

The introduction of fentanyl and other more powerful synthetic opioids into the drug supply in recent years has pushed overdoses and deaths through the roof in most states. The CDC reports that emergency room visits for opioid overdoses increased 30 percent between July and September last year.

"We can have all the blue-ribbon committees we want, but if we don't get tough on the drug dealers we are wasting our time and that toughness includes the death penalty," Trump declared. "Toughness is the thing that they most fear."

However, Andrew Bremberg, of the White House's Domestic Policy Council, contradicted the president's fulminations, telling reporters last week that the Trump administration would seek the death penalty for large-scale drug traffickers, rather than drug dealers.

This was reiterated by an official White House fact sheet released on Monday, which announced that the "[Department of Justice] will seek the death penalty

against drug traffickers when it's appropriate under current law." That would limit the death penalty to drug-related homicides that already carry a possible death sentence.

According to the fact sheet, the administration is also seeking legislation from Congress which would lower the threshold for mandatory minimum sentences for the possession of opioids that are lethal in small amounts, such as fentanyl.

The Death Penalty Information Center notes that US law currently allows for the death penalty in drug-related cases only in limited instances where drug use or distribution can be related to a murder. Otherwise there are no provisions which allow for prosecutors to seek the death penalty merely for distribution or trafficking.

While the president paid lip service to the giving addicts access to treatment options and public health initiatives during his remarks Monday—including praise for companies which have donated small supplies of drugs like Narcan, which can quickly reverse an opioid overdose—Trump presented the problem as a law enforcement issue.

He claimed that individual drug dealers are responsible for "thousands" of deaths and should not be allowed to serve limited prison sentences if they are convicted, but rather should face the prospect of life in prison or execution.

Trump blamed the ongoing crisis on America's supposedly lax drug laws, contrasting this situation to countries that have "zero tolerance" policies which provide for the death penalty for dealers and traffickers. While he didn't mention him by name Monday, Trump has previously lauded Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, who has directed the police and vigilantes to murder alleged drug dealers and addicts.

Not surprisingly the president took the time to praise the police and federal immigration agents who are carrying out his administration's crackdown on immigrants, to promote the construction a border wall along the US-Mexico border, and to blame the drug crisis on so-called sanctuary cities as well as Mexico and China. Trump declared that it was necessary to "build the wall to keep the damn drugs out!"

New Hampshire was picked for Trump's address because it is one of the states hardest hit by the opioid crisis, with an overdose death rate which is nearly double the national figure, having risen more than 340 percent over the last decade. The president repeated remarks he had made earlier this month at a rally in Pennsylvania, a state which has also been ravaged by the opioid crisis.

The highest death rate from opioid overdoses has been concentrated in the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic and New England: West Virginia, New Hampshire, Ohio, District of Columbia, Massachusetts and Maryland. The largest increases in opioid overdose deaths between 2006 and 2016 were seen in Ohio and Pennsylvania, rising more than 400 percent. These two states were key to Trump's defeat of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election.

Drug overdose has quickly become the leading cause of death for Americans under 50 years old. So many people have died in the overdose epidemic that US life expectancy fell in 2015 and 2016, a decline unprecedented in modern history.

Last year Trump declared the epidemic a "public health emergency," a public relations maneuver which did not provide any new federal funding to the crisis, instead redirecting money from other federal programs.

The federal government distributed just \$1 billion to states in 2017 to assist in efforts to confront the crisis, and Congress recently approved another \$2 billion in funding over two years. This pales in comparison to the \$32 billion in federal funds for HIV/AIDS research and prevention last year. Only a public health effort on that scale could make serious inroads into the opioid crisis.

At the same time, federal and state agencies have turned a blind eye as pharmaceutical companies flooded communities across America with cheap and easy to obtain prescription opioids, while cracking down on small time distributors and imprisoning a growing number of addicts who often find limited

treatment options in prison.

Trump's pick to head the Office of National Drug Policy (the "drug czar"), Representative Tom Marino, was forced to withdraw last year when it was revealed that he played a key role in limiting the ability of the Drug Enforcement Administration to block the pharmaceutical industry's flooding of low income rural areas with prescription opioids.



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