

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Walla Walla Fentanyl Roundtable

August 24, 2023

Sen. Cantwell Remarks

[\[AUDIO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you so much for everyone convening and being willing to give input.

This is our [eighth] meeting that we've had around the State of Washington because this emergency of fentanyl impacting our state is having such grave effects.

So we want to hear from people throughout the state about what they are seeing, and what they think might work best in trying to address this problem. But certainly, for the federal level to work with you, because you're on the front lines of this emergency.

We've had a lot of discussions with some pretty big communities. But I felt that it was important to have the discussion with some communities that might feel like they're out there on their own as it relates to resources or may not have all the resources they need -- and so what other strategies could we deploy that might be helpful.

[In] Walla Walla [County] 14 out of the 21 drug overdoses since January of 2022 have been fentanyl. So it is the major reason you're seeing overdoses. A [fentanyl] pill in Walla Walla County can cost as little as \$1.

And so this is the problem that we're seeing around the state that this is just so cheap now, and it's flooding our communities. We already this year, have had as much fentanyl basically seized by law enforcement as we did for all of last year.

So we know the supply keeps rushing in. And that is why we worked federally just before the August recess [passed] a bill out of the Senate called the FEND Off Fentanyl Act. That is to try to get the Department of Treasury, the Drug Enforcement Agency and others to have the power to seize any assets related to the cartels, or the banking or anything that is structured around helping the distribution of this drug. So we think with this stronger tool in our hands, we will be able to try to track down and stop some of the distribution.

But our state overall has been [the] state with the highest increase in deaths. And we think that is related to distribution, the I-5 corridor, all the way from California to Vancouver, BC, is a path and a market. And we definitely are going to do everything we can to try to give better tools to local law enforcement to work collaboratively with the feds to try to stop the flow of this product.

But we also want to attack fentanyl in our communities. And so I want to listen to you what you think are some of those issues. I know that in Walla Walla patients who need inpatient substance abuse typically have to drive to Yakima or Spokane.

So I don't know what you guys are thinking in general about that or if you're seeing as much need. But the fact that Walla Walla County doesn't have a single residential treatment facility. I would assume I'm going to hear about that. But I'll let you tell me. Okay, you tell me about that. Because maybe there's

some creative things to think about how we how we handle that and what we do, but definitely a healthcare workforce and access issue is the constant rejoinder all over the state.

So even if you're in a big city, they still don't have all the resources they need. They certainly don't have all the health care workers they need. And we're trying to figure out what can we do to try to add capacity to the existing system? What could we do? So here with the health care providers, what could we do to add existing capacity?

I won't be surprised if I hear about housing and housing shortages, because that's also an issue. That's an issue all over our state. But we definitely need to make an investment in more affordable housing. It just needs to be there.

We're a big supporter of the Low Income Housing Tax Credit, and, and I was just talking to my colleague, Senator [Ron] Wyden before I came in, he said, "This is what I'm hearing all over Oregon right now." And I said, "I'm not surprised."

You can be in Ag country, and you can be talking to cattlemen, and they'll tell you, we don't have enough housing. And you could be in a small town and they'll tell you, we don't have enough housing, or you could be in Vancouver, Washington or Portland and you can [hear] we don't have enough housing. So we need to do something about that.

I'm also working with TSA and DEA at our airports. They need a little more authority to help investigate this at our airports. This is a little surprising to me, but given, again, the volume of this drug, we have to figure out every single way we can to stop its flow in to our state. And so we're working on that now.

And I do think that collaboration, everybody working together -- and I haven't met a community that wasn't already working together because that's what you're doing, you're facing this head on. But I'm saying we need to be a good federal partner. This needs to be a declared national emergency. We need federal help. We need to back up people on the ground, and that's why we're here to hear what you think some of those solutions might look like. So thank you.