

How Congress Can Fix Idaho's Opioid Addiction Crisis (Opinion)

By Rep. Marco Erickson | November 23, 2022

Throughout my life, I have always been a fixer. After I lost my father to drunk driving when I was a child, I became passionate about the power of prevention.

I earned a master's degree in psychology to help guide others facing similar struggles down a safer path. When I saw policy failures during my years at a behavioral health agency, I decided to run for the state Legislature in Idaho to support those with mental health and substance use struggles. Now I cannot help but ask why policy leaders in Washington are not doing more to fix the opioid addiction crisis from worsening in Idaho and across the country.

Congress can take the first step to protect more Idahoans from the harms of opioid addiction by passing legislation this year to prevent addiction before it starts.

It's no secret to those in Idaho that the opioid epidemic is a problem. Over the last year, there was almost a 20% increase in predicted drug overdoses in our state — enormously higher than the national average of 6.7%. On a national level, 75% of overdose deaths in 2021 involved opioids. We lost almost 81,000 family members, neighbors and friends, including over 360 in Idaho. Despite this, opioids are still prescribed at a high rate, with 49.9 prescriptions per 100 people in Idaho alone.

The numbers are clear: Idaho's opioid addiction crisis is a problem that needs a national solution. Throughout my career working in mental health, I saw the impact opioids had on our community. My biggest takeaway is that it is easier to fix a problem before it starts, especially with the lack of education around the effects of opioids. When I ask people how they fell into substance use disorder, I often hear it started with something as simple as a routine dental operation, back pain or sports-related injury surgery.

There is a clear fix to this problem, though. The Non-Opioids Prevent Addiction in the Nation Act (S 586/HR 3259) would help to prevent opioid addiction by increasing access to non-opioid pain management options — which aligns with new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance that says non-opioids are just as effective as opioids for treating acute pain. The NOPAIN Act would accomplish this by changing outdated Medicare policy, which currently incentivizes opioid prescriptions through current payment systems. The legislation would create a separate reimbursement for non-opioid treatments in outpatient surgical settings.

For patients who work closely with a provider to manage their pain and have found that opioids are the right fit for them, the NOPAIN Act does nothing to impact their care.

We won't have these options, though, unless lawmakers in Washington take action. While the bill has over 165 bipartisan cosponsors in Congress, it will take leadership, including our own Sen. Mike Crapo, ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, to get the NOPAIN Act across the finish line.

I urge those in Washington to include this legislation in an end-of-year package and be part of the solution to the opioid addiction crisis in Idaho.

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