

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Vancouver Fentanyl Roundtable

August 14th, 2023

Sen. Cantwell Remarks

[\[AUDIO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you Eric and thank you for that beautiful quotation and for your leadership in your community and for helping us today. This is our [sixth] listening session around the state of Washington. So Mayor it is great to be here in Vancouver and Councilwoman great to be in Clark County. And to have all of you give us input and advice on what is really a national emergency, and clearly something that is impacting the State of Washington to a great degree. And even here in Southwest Washington, the numbers are quite tragic.

We know that 67 people died from medical related overdoses in Clark County in 2022, there was over a 500% increase in fentanyl related overdoses between 2018 and 2022. And last year, law enforcement seized over 1.5 million pills laced with fentanyl in our state. This year, they've already seized 1.6 million fentanyl pills and it's just August.

So you can see that this is a supply being brought into our state. I have a feeling that I-5 and the I-5 corridor is a transport system for this product. And we need new tools to fight back. That is why I'm having a listening tour around the State of Washington to hear from individuals all connected to challenges that we are trying to face and fighting back.

And so today, I want to hear from each of you what you think some of those unique opportunities for us to work together from a federal perspective, and hopefully give us the tools that we need. The impacts on both sides of the Columbia River, Portland and Vancouver, I'm pretty sure if we went over there we'd see the same information.

Fentanyl is coming up from Mexico passing through Oregon into Vancouver. And distribution, as I mentioned is just one aspect of this. But we have to do something to fight that. That is why we just recently before we left in July, passed out of the [Senate] a part of the [National Defense Authorization Act], the FEND [Off Fentanyl] Act, which is a federal law that will help give us better tools in fighting the cartels and fighting the money laundering that is going on that is supplying the money behind fentanyl distribution.

By being able to name specific cartels and individuals we can go after their assets and we can go after the banking that is money laundering this product. So that legislation will also pass the House of Representatives and get on to the President's desk. But the FEND Off Fentanyl [Act] is a key tool that we can help with at the federal level.

I plan also to look at new federal policy to help better police at our airports to give TSA the authority they need to do search and seizure of this product. Because we're finding that this product, because of the amounts of money people are making, can come in in all sorts of ways and I'm sure our law enforcement can tell us a little bit about that today.

We need more treatment options when people are in crisis. They deserve access to help immediately and I'm sure I'll hear today that that immediate access is still one of our biggest challenges. That when people, either our first responders are going to the scene that often you can't get people into immediate treatment right there.

Clark County has [three] providers for HHS-certified Opioid Treatment Programs where providers can prescribe methadone. All three are in Vancouver, and neighboring Cowlitz County has just one OTP in Kelso. So providers in Clark County said there's not enough capacity here for all the patients. So, I'll look forward to hearing what ideas people have about that today.

We do need more OTP and medical professionals who are trained in opioid addiction. We've heard that all across the state, again, immediate access, skilled workforce, and a discussion in Seattle over building capacity by having an immediate access facility.

And obviously, we want to expand research [and] testing for tranq, or xylazine, a sedative that is often combined with fentanyl. And last I'm sure, because I've had many conversations with the Mayor about this already and visits here in Vancouver, we have tried to focus on affordable housing.

Getting people into affordable housing is also a key component of trying to help people. We know that we have a shortage statewide of 174,000 low income housing units. In Clark County we need to add many more units over the next 20 years. Some people are estimating high double-digits of that. And so I want to work with the community and law enforcement on these issues to really help give the communities the tools to fight back.

So thank you for being here today. I look forward to hearing from individuals with lived experience, they too are telling us what we need to do and we need to listen to what they have to say because they are oftentimes the people who made it through the process. They are key to telling us what else we need to help others make it through the process too. So thank you very much.