

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA)

**Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Hearing Titled: Interdicting
Illicit Drug Trafficking: A View from the Front Lines**

February 26, 2025

Cantwell Opening Remarks

[VIDEO](#) | [AUDIO](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for having this very important hearing on fentanyl and what our committee and committee jurisdiction can do to stop the scourge of fentanyl.

I very much appreciate the witnesses being here, Police Chief of Spokane, Chief Hall, and Mrs. Ehlinger, I'm so sorry for your loss of your son, Jake. You are such a brave advocate and thank you. There are many brave advocates, like Laura Lynch who talks in Seattle about the loss of her daughter Brillion, and you are making a difference. So thank you for being here today.

And I look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman, as we fight this scourge and work within our committee jurisdiction. Of the 10 states with the highest number of drug related overdoses, they all host major intermodal hubs. That is to say, states like mine, Washington, and yours, Texas, are clear nexuses to transportation networks. I think we're going to hear from Chief Hall about how those networks allow for the distribution of fentanyl once they are across the border.

And overdose deaths continue to rise in most western states, up 14% in Washington just last year.

The supply chain is clear: the Chinese Triad sells precursor chemicals to Mexican drug cartels, hidden on ships and in air cargoes, and cartels make fentanyl and smuggle it through the United States. They hide fentanyl and personal vehicles, commercial trucks, busses, trains, planes and even on unmanned aerial vehicles. So, this is a danger to our national security and our transportation security. It is very highly toxic.

So, it is Mr. Chairman, the jurisdiction of our committee to have oversight over transportation security. Last year, I fought for more non-intrusive inspection technologies at U, S, Customs and Border, CBP, who I know we'll hear from as well, about how it now has 370 large non-intrusive inspection systems, and more than 4000 small systems across various ports of entry. I've seen firsthand how this helps us detect better the next generation of technology.

Vapor technology could be developed by our Pacific Northwest Lab and the University of Washington to increase even the speed and accuracy of this analysis. Our national lab's Vapor ID accurately detects and identifies the vapors from illicit drugs and explosives in real time and

in extremely small amounts. Rather than using surface swipes or the pulse of air for analysis, the system sniffs the vapors, much the way a trained canine can detect explosives.

So our borders are not our only problem, but this fentanyl detection at our borders is working. We need to do more. Fentanyl smuggling happens every day within the borders of our country, on our interstates, on our Amtrak, at our bus terminals, at our airports, in concealed US Mail, and we must track the activities of these transportation networks.

Recent interdiction efforts in the state of Washington illustrate the importance of joint law enforcement efforts at our transportation hubs and networks. Just last October, we had the largest coordinated drug trafficking bust in Seattle. 600 officers from 10 different states, local law enforcement agencies, and they disrupted a violent drug trafficking gang. It resulted from a wiretap investigation of a shipment of fentanyl into the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

A year-long investigation was led by Homeland Security, the Seattle Police, involving the US Attorney, FBI, DEA ATF, CBP, Washington State Patrol, the King County Sheriff's Office, and Bellevue, Everett, Renton Police departments, and Yakima Narcotics and Gang Task Force members.

And in January, a 2023 law enforcement also conducted a bust at SeaTac discovering more than 400,000 fentanyl pills in a checked baggage of drug couriers. Traffickers were smuggling millions of pills into Puget Sound. The Port of Seattle Police Department, working with DEA and canine, seized that fentanyl, and the Phoenix Police Department then arrested the suspects in Arizona. In 2024 the Burien Police Department, King County Sheriff's Office, and DEA seized more than 1 million fentanyl pills and meth and heroin, and traffickers transported hundreds of pounds of drugs in a semi-truck on a regular trip from Southern California into Washington. So, we must give law enforcement more tools- more tools to attack these transportation networks and stop the flow of these drugs into our states.

Chief Kevin Hall of the Spokane police department with us today, has worked closely with federal, state and local law enforcement for more than 30 years. He'll be speaking to this experience in Eastern Washington and what he calls the superhighways for fentanyl distribution.

As an enrolled member of the Colville Tribe, he also knows that tribal communities have been hard hit by the fentanyl crisis because it's another place to hide these drugs in these rings. And that is why last year, I introduced with Senators Baldwin, Lujan, and Rosen the Stop Fentanyl Smuggling Act, largely supported by law enforcement, transportation and forensic science groups, including the National High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program.

And so witness Shannon Kelly is a director of the National High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program. She's also a member of the interdiction coordinator at the Office of the National Drug Control Policy. So I look forward to asking her about this and the ways in which we can all work together to stop the flow of fentanyl, accelerate the development of next generation non-intrusive inspection technology, and build state and local forensic science capabilities.

So, I hope that we all can work together collaboratively. I think it shows that we can disrupt this trafficking. So I'm very pleased to work with you, Mr. Chairman, on these issues, and I appreciate your focus on the Coast Guard's critical role in this area. I know that the Coast Guard

has been working, but we need to do more. I want to acknowledge that the crew of the Coast Guard [cutter] Waesche who interdicted more than 37,000 pounds of cocaine worth \$275 million earlier this month. I'm also saddened to hear that a crew member was lost at sea. So our thoughts and prayers are with their family and friends.

I think Senator Cruz, you and I have introduced this bipartisan Coast Guard reauthorization act, which would increase authorization levels, and I hope that the Coast Guard critical counter narcotics mission and other missions will be bolstered in our efforts.

We need to do everything, as you have displayed here, that if you leave a territory unaddressed, that is where the drug will flow, so attacking this at all levels is the right idea. And so I look forward to working with you as we, in this committee, tackle the transportation networks that are threatening the lives of young individuals and many more Americans. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Spokane Police Chief Kevin Hall – Opening Remarks

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Police Chief Kevin Hall: Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Cantwell, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the fentanyl crisis, an issue of national urgency that devastates communities across the country, including my own, Spokane, Washington.

My name is Kevin Hall. I'm honored to serve as Police Chief for the City of Spokane, the second largest city in the State of Washington. I was appointed to the position in August of 2024 after previously serving more than 32 years in the Tucson Police Department in Tucson, Arizona. the last nearly eight years as Assistant Chief.

My 33-year career in policing has focused on violent crime, addressing the impacts of drugs and drug trafficking and public safety at both local and national levels. Since 2019, the annual number of opioid drug overdoses has doubled in Washington state and Spokane's opioid deaths have surpassed the state's average.

Recent reports by the CDC and DEA illustrate a national decline in fatal drug overdoses are not the reality in Washington state. The Spokane Fire Department's calls for overdoses have increased 30% in 2024 over the previous year.

Like every other urban police agency in the country, the Spokane Police Department continues to allocate more and more resources to address open air drug use, fatal drug overdoses and the overall harm caused to the community by fentanyl. The Spokane County Medical Examiner reported at least 346 opioid related deaths last year, over 75% involving fentanyl.

The economic toll is staggering. The Senate's Joint Economic Committee estimated the opioid crisis cost the U.S. \$1.5 trillion in 2020 alone.

Fentanyl's impact stems from its potency: 40 to 50 times more lethal than heroin and its alarming accessibility. From my experience in Southern Arizona, I know that most fentanyl enters the U.S. through legal ports of entry, concealed in commercial cargo trucks, passenger vehicles, trailers and RVs.

Recent seizures highlight the scale of trafficking along transportation routes. In Tucson, law enforcement intercepted 1.7 million fentanyl pills in just two stops in late 2024. Spokane's supply chain follows similar patterns, moving drugs from Mexico along interstates, I-19, I-10 and I-5, before reaching Eastern Washington via I-90.

Spokane officers have recently encountered bulk powder fentanyl, an emerging and highly dangerous trend.

Fentanyl trafficking has direct and violent consequences. A harrowing example of this occurred in Spokane when an investigation where traffickers, using I-90, transported bulk fentanyl pill loads to Spokane from the Tri-Cities area. Spokane PD and federal partners, after an intensive investigation, interdicted the trafficker, resulting in a violent midday shoot out with Spokane police officers that endangered innocents, including small children who were in the area. 2,000 fentanyl pills received from the car that the suspect was traveling in.

Elsewhere in Washington, drug traffickers have used commercial trucks, passenger rail, and even commercial airlines, as seen in a 2023 investigation at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, where 400,000 fentanyl pills were found in checked baggage. The U S Department of Homeland Security estimated that drug traffickers were bringing millions of pills a month into the Seattle region via drug couriers checked luggage.

Another separate investigation Seattle in the fall 2024 culminated in the arrest of 12 violent fentanyl traffickers, the seizure of significant amounts of fentanyl dozens of weapons and highlighted what effective federal and local law enforcement partnerships look like. With the Department of Homeland Security, Seattle Police Department, US Attorney General's Office among the agencies involved, this investigation directly stemmed from the previously mentioned checked baggage investigation at SeaTac Airport.

Interdicting fentanyl requires strong partnerships between local, state, federal and tribal agencies. We must enhance these collaborations with improved technology and resources.

That is why I respectfully urge Congress to pass the Stop Smuggling Illicit Synthetic Drugs on US Transportation Networks Act.

This legislation would expand non-intrusive inspection technologies such as drive-through and mobile X-ray sensors, specialized canine resources, vapor technology, to strengthen our ability to detect and disrupt fentanyl trafficking before it reaches our streets.

The fight against fentanyl is urgent. It's real. Strengthening our enforcement capabilities will save lives. Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions.

Q&A with Chief Hall

[VIDEO](#) | [AUDIO](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Mr. Chairman, thanks for mentioning the TRANQ act. I too supported that important legislation, which is one of the tools. And I just want to say, Ms. Ehlinger, again, you know, we've had, I think, 11 regional meetings in my state, and it's just the story is the same. The story is the same, and the call is the same. We need to be more alert. I'll never forget a high school student in Yakima, Washington telling me that, you know, having an assembly once a year is not enough. You should be telling high schoolers every day, do not take anything given to you by anyone other than a health care provider. Just don't.

And I think that we have to amplify on many different fronts. We have to fight this scourge on many different fronts. So again, thank you for your willingness to continue to push on this, and you know the jurisdiction of this committee is a little more on the transportation network, but your illumination of the problem just shows you what distribution does to destroy families.

I want to ask Chief Hall about those distribution networks, because we hear a lot about the border, and we want more security and detection at the border. But it's clear that these rings are so elaborate that by tackling the transportation network, we can discover and illuminate and catch these rings. And what have we learned about these networks and transportation systems, and why is interdiction like you've experienced in Spokane or Tucson, why do we need to expand the tools given to law enforcement to help with this?

Chief Hall: Thank you, Ranking Member Cantwell for the question. There are a number of different reasons on why we need to do this, but primarily when I talk to my DEA, DHS partners, it's that we're catching a fraction of the illegal narcotics that are entering the country.

Such a small amount, it looks huge on the on the newspaper, on the front page when we, you know, when we post shots of it for the media, but that's just a fraction of what's actually entering the country, and we're missing so much more. And we know we're missing so much more.

The investigations, particularly the collaborative investigations with our federal partners, are where we're the most functional and we see the most success. Bringing local, state, tribal, and federal partners together just enhances or scales up all of the skill sets and brings in the, quite frankly, the resources of the federal government that most of us don't have.

But collaborating allows us to locate more, to utilize the intelligence base from the federal government on international or national transportation routes, and through, like we said, rail, sea, air, and the interstates, which is where we're seeing most of this. The investment by the cartels, and make no mistake, this is all cartel driven, is such that they will completely disassemble a vehicle, a brand new vehicle, put as much narcotics into every single void inside that vehicle, and then assemble it again. They will go through that amount of energy, put the vehicle back together, and put it on the road and it's off on the freeways.

The 1.7 million pills that I referenced in my opening statement, that was in two vehicles, two sedans, two nondescript sedans that had to be completely disassembled in order to recover all of those narcotics.

Sen. Cantwell: And how did you discover to check those?

Chief Hall: Investigations.

Sen. Cantwell: Something told you.

Chief Hall: Yes ma'am

Sen. Cantwell: This is why I want us to have a more collaborative effort here. Because when you look at the technology that we have at the border that is doing some of this detection. But like you said, they're tearing cars apart, and so, what do you think a new vapor technology could help us do?

Chief Hall: Any tool will help us down this road, whether it's x-ray technology, vapor technology, even going to like, I call old school, canine technology. They're all very effective in different ways, and having a layered approach and across sector approach, multi-faceted, this is a very complex problem, it requires complex solutions. And having all of those technologies and all of those different approaches is just going to enhance law enforcement's ability to detect and seize these narcotics.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I'm just going to be a little more clear about the challenges of getting a warrant on search and seizure are complex, but when you're at one of our ports or transportation systems and you [have] basically a non-invasive way to detect the movement of fentanyl, that's what I want at every transportation hub because that will stop this flow, and it's not going to stop all of but it will give us the tools that you're talking about. And then how can we best help too, on the on the labs and the information -- what's the gap there that we're seeing?

Chief Hall: I'm sorry, the labs?

Sen. Cantwell: Locally how you have to do the work to try to detect and figure out what you've acquired?

Chief Hall: A lot of it is, is just the sheer number the backlog. So, say we're working with the state lab in order to process the narcotics that we seize, we have to wait for that processing in order to charge for the most part.

So, it's that kind of resource that is limited. And I know from my time in Arizona, it was the same issue there. It's just, it's a capacity issue. There's so much illegal narcotics coming into the country, and so few people doing this work, including lab personnel, law enforcement, even harm reduction agencies that we work with.

You know, going to an earlier point is we inform them -- everything that you see out on the street, from marijuana to what you think is cocaine, to what you think is a prescribed pill -- is going to have fentanyl in it. What we're finding out is everything we test has fentanyl in it. So, we just tell everybody, 'know what you're taking its fentanyl.'

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you. Thank you. Mr. Chairman.

Cantwell Q&A Part 2
[VIDEO](#) | [AUDIO](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the second group of panel witnesses who have been on the front lines of fighting this. I very much appreciate your being here today.

I wanted to start with you, Director Kelly, just in comments about the legislation that we introduced last year, you were supportive of that, which we appreciate. But this whole area of how to build capacity and attacking the transportation networks. We heard from Spokane Chief Hall about why this worked and why it does work, right? In the sense of the transportation networks beyond the border.

What do you think? You think that you can easily grow that capacity within your organization? Is that right? The support for our legislation, which requires a stop fentanyl smuggling transportation network strategy?

Kelly: Thank you so much for the question, Ranking Member Cantwell, and we share your keen interest in ensuring that all modalities of our transportation network are secure. That has been a particular challenge in the past, and we have focused increasing efforts on ensuring that we're hitting all points through our partners at the US Postal Inspection Service and securing our parcel systems, also attacking transportation on rail, via air, both passenger and cargo.

We share your interest as well in a fentanyl strategy, certainly at the Office of National Drug Control Policy. Biannually, we prepare the National Drug Control Strategy, and our next one will be due in 2026, but we certainly appreciate the focus that a fentanyl strategy would bring, and we are happy to engage with our partners at the National Security Council and lead that effort.

Sen. Cantwell: But once we had that and your authority, you could plug this into the current system and then just leverage this extra local law enforcement effort to go after these transportation networks.

Kelly: I think we would have to build out a complete plan for this, but certainly that using the existing framework would make great sense.

Sen. Cantwell: Great. I just wanted to clarify that, because I feel like you were already somewhat there, but this is about growing the capacity to target these transportation modes. And did you want to comment anything about the technology, the vapor, how important a breakthrough that could be?

Kelly: Absolutely. I think we are very interested in ensuring that we're using bleeding edge technology when and where possible. I would also mention, though, that we want to make sure that we maintain robust support for all dimensions of interdiction, which would include ensuring that we have manpower who are trained appropriately, who are good, well equipped at detecting suspicious behavior when they pull someone over as part of a roadside interdiction, making sure

that we're also funding canines. This is a much more basic, foundational effort, but in some places, we're still hearing from state and local agencies that they don't have resources like that. So I think we do want to hit it on all fronts with both the high tech solutions, but also the more nuts and bolts solutions as well.

Sen. Cantwell: Yeah, you're not going to find a bigger supporter of the canines than myself. Talking to SeaTac, they were like, people walk in, they see the canines, and they turn around and leave. It is a deterrent in and of itself. But the non-evasive technology issue is just a way to say to the bus stations, to the airports, to everybody, "We're going to catch you," and hopefully help us in that effort.

I wanted to ask Mr. Miller about CBP's use of safe boats, their organization in our state, but apparently that structure works well?

Miller: Thank you. Ranking Member Cantwell, yeah, absolutely the safe boats that we have, and I've visited where they make them for us in-

Sen. Cantwell: Bremerton.

Miller: -Bremerton multiple times. So, we have two varieties. We have a center console version that we refer to as our Coastal Interceptor vessel. It's 40-feet, it's custom designed specifically for our needs. And then we have a closed cabin version called the All Weather interceptor that we use in more of our cold weather locations. Both of them have been game changers in our fleet. Legacy customs, we used go-fast vessels that we basically turned into law enforcement vessels, but these are the first ones that are custom tailored for law enforcement.

Sen. Cantwell: But these are, these are helping us on our waterways- to detect the smuggling on our waterways?

Miller: Absolutely, absolutely. We've recently repowered them. We're doing other modifications to make them safer for our agents during high risk pursuits and boardings.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you. And I'll have something for the record for the Rear Admiral to talk about, but very much support the Coast Guard [and] increasing capacity for them. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.