



STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

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Value of Wellness

I would like to thank Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and members of the Senate HELP Committee for hosting hearings on the topic of wellness.

The U.S. is the global leader in medical research and medical care. However, there are reasons for concern. Despite spending over \$3.2 trillion annually on healthcare – which is significantly more than any other country – we continue to have room for improvement when it comes to life expectancy and other indicators of health.

Chronic diseases – like heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) – are the leading cause of death and disability in the U.S. and among the most costly, yet these afflictions may be preventable. The World Health Organization reports that at least 80 percent of all heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes and up to 40 percent of cancer could be prevented if people ate better, engaged in more physical activity and ceased to use tobacco.¹

And while there has been some stabilization in deaths from some chronic diseases, we are now facing unprecedented increases in deaths due to suicide, liver cirrhosis from alcohol consumption, and drug overdoses, largely due to overdose deaths involving prescription or illicit opioids. The President recently called upon Acting Secretary Hargan to declare the opioids crisis plaguing our communities a nationwide Public Health Emergency. These so-called deaths of despair are affecting all Americans across the country, and are brought on in part by a lack of hope and opportunity. The opioid epidemic impacts our families and communities, and it is taking a toll on our economy. The economic burden of the prescription opioid crisis is \$78.5 billion in healthcare, law enforcement, and lost productivity. The good news is that research shows that for each dollar invested in evidence-based prevention programs, up to \$10 is saved in treatment for alcohol or other substance misuse-related costs.² And these prevention programs go beyond preventing or lowering the risks of addiction – they also have been shown to prevent delinquency, teen pregnancy, school dropout, and violence.³

Effective public health interventions and policies that target deaths of despair and chronic diseases lead to a healthier population with lower health care spending, less school and workplace absenteeism, increased economic productivity, and an improved quality of life.

¹ *Preventing chronic diseases: a vital investment*, World Health Organization, 2005, http://www.who.int/chp/chronic_disease_report/full_report.pdf; *Noncommunicable diseases country profiles*, World Health Organization, July 2014, <http://www.who.int/nmh/publications/ncd-profiles-2014/en/>

² *Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health*, Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, November 2016, <https://addiction.surgeongeneral.gov/>

³ *Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health*, Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, November 2016, <https://addiction.surgeongeneral.gov/>

By investing in the prevention and treatment of the most common chronic diseases, one estimate shows the U.S. could decrease treatment costs by \$218 billion per year and reduce the economic impact of disease by \$1.1 trillion annually.⁴

Scientists have found that the conditions in which we live and work have an enormous impact on our health, long before we ever see a doctor. Wellness starts in our families, our schools and workplaces, in our playgrounds and parks, and in the air we breathe and the water we drink.

Wellness and the Business Sector

Productivity losses as a result of employees who don't come to work, or work while sick, cost U.S. employers \$225.8 billion annually, or about \$1,685 per employee each year. For example, obesity and obesity-related illnesses, like diabetes, cost the nation over \$153 billion per year in lost productivity.⁵

As an administration, we are focused on the opioid crisis currently impacting our country, and with good reason. Prescription opioid addiction and non-fatal overdoses cost \$20.4 billion in lost productivity in 2013.⁶ According to the National Safety Council, a worker with a substance use disorder is not as productive, is more likely to make a mistake, and may take twice as many sick days. Companies that recognize addiction and support their staff have found that employees in recovery have lower turnover rates, are less likely to miss work, and are less likely to be hospitalized and have fewer doctor visits.

A community with poor health results in local businesses with workforce shortages; absenteeism; presenteeism, when workers are on the job but are not fully functioning due to illness or other medical conditions; work-related injuries and illnesses; declines in productivity and profitability; and issues with workforce recruitment and retention. As I travel around the country, I have heard that businesses are now struggling to fill open positions because applicants are unable to pass their drug tests. Businesses that recognize addiction and help employees get into treatment allow employers to keep valued employees. Furthermore, employers also avoid the high costs of termination, recruitment, and retraining new staff.

The business sector is a critical partner in helping achieve gains in the wellness of Americans. The private sector pays for about half of total healthcare spending in the United States. Rather than viewing health merely as an insurance expense to be controlled, more companies are seeing the building of a health culture as a business opportunity.

After CVS removed tobacco products from store shelves and renamed itself CVS Health, new revenues more than made up for lost sales while also reducing the purchases of cigarette packs

⁴ *An Unhealthy America: The Economic Burden of Chronic Disease -- Charting a New Course to Save Lives and Increase Productivity and Economic Growth*, Milken Institute, 2007,

http://assets1b.milkeninstitute.org/assets/Publication/ResearchReport/PDF/chronic_disease_report.pdf

⁵ Stewart WF, Ricci JA, Chee E, Morganstein D. Lost productive work time costs from health conditions in the United States: results from the American productivity audit. *J Occup Environ Med.* 2003;45(12):1234-1246

⁶ Florence, Curtis S., Chao Zhou, Feijun Luo and Likang Xu. "The Economic Burden of Prescription Opioid Overdose, Abuse, and Dependence in the United States, 2013." *Medical Care* 54 10 (2016): 901-6

by at least 95 million at "all retailers."⁷ General Dynamics Bath Iron Works, a large full-service shipyard in Maine employing over 6,000 employees, extended a successful in-house diabetes prevention initiative into the wider community. It expects to cut participants' future healthcare costs over five years by 60 percent on average.

The health and economy of communities are often strongly correlated. Healthier communities tend to be economically more prosperous and vice versa. Improved community conditions for health, such as clean and safe neighborhoods, access to healthful food options, and opportunities for exercise and physical activity, can help positively influence health behaviors and lead to a more productive workforce.

Several businesses are implementing health initiatives that go beyond workplace wellness programs to support community health. For example, Target is putting wellness at the center of its Corporate Social Responsibility strategy, having invested \$40 million dollars in more than 50 non-profit organizations around the U.S., which focus on increasing the physical activity and healthy eating habits of children and their families in local communities.

Wellness and National Security

As a United States Public Health Service (USPHS) Commissioned Corps officer and member of the uniformed services, I know that wellness is at the heart of the safety and security of our nation. It is estimated that seven in ten youths (ages 17-24) would fail to qualify for military service due to obesity, educational deficits, or behavioral health issues/criminal history.⁸

In order to ensure a strong national defense, we need to ensure threats to service member recruitment, retention, readiness, and resilience are mitigated. As Surgeon General, I am working to bring awareness to this issue by publicizing my annual physical fitness test for the USPHS, which evaluates four key components of fitness: cardiorespiratory endurance, upper body endurance, core endurance, and flexibility. I will be working with members of the PHS Commissioned Corps, National Guard, and other Department of Defense reserves to work with local schools in order to implement evidence-based programs to increase physical fitness. Not just because our youth deserve to be healthy, but also for their educational benefit and the benefit of teachers and their classrooms as well. Research demonstrates that students who engage in physical activity have greater attention spans in class and higher test scores in addition to the health benefits.

Surgeon General Priorities

Recognizing the role of wellness in our country's safety, security, and prosperity is the reason I will focus my term as Surgeon General on "Better Health through Better Partnerships." This means we will strengthen ties with existing public health and healthcare partners, while forging new partnerships with the business, law enforcement, education, and defense sectors, as well as religious and faith-based, and other community organizations.

⁷ [CVS; Forbes, 2015](#)

⁸ Unfit to Serve, [CDC infographic](#); Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve, [Mission: Readiness Report, 2009](#)

It is for this reason I have decided my signature Surgeon General's report will focus on the intersection between health and the economy, and how businesses are able to thrive by investing in the health of their employees and communities. By partnering with non-traditional sectors and helping them recognize their role in wellness at the community level, we allow everyone to have a fair chance for good health and opportunities for better health choices. Achieving wellness at the community level is paramount to eliminating chronic disease, improving quality of life, reducing healthcare costs, and increasing life expectancy. By investing in communities, we can ensure the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' goal of healthier people, stronger communities, and a safer nation.