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The Prescription Drug Epidemic in America  
House Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security

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Written Statement of  
U.S. Representative Mary Bono Mack

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before the

Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security  
Judiciary Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives

March 7, 2012

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this critically important hearing on the growing and deadly dangers prescription drug abuse poses to our nation. One incident last year, in particular, graphically captures the seriousness of this issue.

On June 19<sup>th</sup> in Medford, New York, a man walked into a pharmacy and murdered four people for 11,000 tablets of hydrocodone – an opioid used to manufacture a long list of narcotic pain killers, including Vicodon. One of those gunned down was a 33-year-old customer engaged to be married. Instead, she was buried in her wedding dress. A 17-year-old pharmacy employee was also killed and later buried in her prom dress along with her high school diploma.

This senseless tragedy is just one example of a growing wave of drug store robberies by prescription drug addicts. But it's also part of a larger, rapidly escalating struggle nationwide against prescription drug abuse and addiction, which is expected to claim the lives of nearly 30,000 Americans this year.

Just last weekend, I met in California with dozens of parents who have lost children to this horrible epidemic.

Two classes of medicines – painkillers, and insomnia and anxiety drugs – are responsible for about 70 deaths and nearly 3,000 emergency room visits a day. That's right – a day. These are truly stunning numbers.

Why is it happening? Scientists tell us that childhood trauma, genetics, mental disorders, depression, stress, anxiety, thrill seeking, peer pressure, severe pain from injuries and illnesses and even the horrors of combat all contribute to prescription drug addictions, which often lead to tragic and avoidable deaths.

But what's even more insidious is the way these powerfully addictive narcotic prescription drugs quickly turn people without any real emotional or physical problems into desperate people suddenly facing life-or-death struggles. Few things are more destructive.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, drug overdose is the now leading cause of injury death in the United States – in large part due to prescription drug abuse.

It's not hard to understand why. Today, some 12 and a half million Americans regularly abuse prescription drugs, and the problem is growing rapidly. There are approximately 7,000 new abusers every day – many of them teenagers and young adults. This alarming trend – now a health epidemic, according to CDC – is taking a huge toll on society.

Today, the abuse of prescription drugs – especially painkillers, stimulants and depressants – is the fastest-growing drug problem in America. As Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade – with jurisdiction over consumer protection – I have made combating prescription drug abuse a top priority. I believe there needs to be a national awakening about the threat this alarming epidemic poses to our families and our communities. Simply put, we are in the midst of an American tragedy.

What can we do? For starters, we must do a better job of monitoring and limiting access to prescription drugs containing controlled-release oxycodone hydrochloride, including the popular pain killer OxyContin.

Originally, OxyContin was intended to be prescribed only for severe pain as a way to help patients dealing with late-stage cancer and other severe illnesses.

Today, however, more and more people across America are being prescribed OxyContin, as well as other generic oxycodone drugs, for less severe reasons – clinically known as moderate pain – greatly expanding the availability and potential for abuse of these powerfully-addictive narcotics. Someone with a toothache or a sore knee should not be prescribed a potentially addictive painkiller.

Clearly, expanded public education plays a role in addressing this problem, but we're not going to make any real progress until we limit access to these powerful narcotic drugs and ensure that only patients in severe pain can obtain them.

We must also improve prescriber education by getting doctors, dentists, nurse practitioners and other prescribers up to speed on the dangers of addiction. Today, I have legislation pending in Congress, the Ryan Creedon Act, HR 2119, to accomplish this goal.

The pervasiveness of prescription drug abuse made national headlines when federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, led by the Drug Enforcement Administration, cracked down on so-called “pill mills” in Florida, where painkillers were routinely dispensed like M&Ms from a gumball machine.

Congress needs to make it much more difficult for these rogue pain clinics to operate, and we should treat offenders like any other street drug dealer. By better coordinating the efforts of local, state and national agencies – and by reducing the supply of highly addictive opioid

painkillers – I am convinced that we can eventually save thousands of lives and spare millions of American families from the heartache of addiction.

Mr. Chairman, no child should ever be buried in a prom dress again because we ignored this problem.