

It is a really hard job because when you are the executive assistant and the scheduler, you have to say no to a lot of people, and you have to say it nicely. You have to make everyone happy, even when you are telling them that the schedule will not allow that to happen. You have to manage phone calls from all seven of my children and my husband, who is upset, and manage the birth of grandchildren, the birthdays, the schedule of when I can get there and when I can't. Is the plane delayed, or is it not? Can you get on Southwest? No, maybe you can make the American flight. On top of it all, he gets me to a million meetings and a million places all at the same time, with a smile on his face, with kindness in his heart, with a whip-sharp intellect, and with a work ethic that is astounding.

I am really upset because he has the nerve to leave and go to law school. I am proud of him for his determination to seek a degree in law. I know he will be an amazing lawyer because he has that touch, where even when he is giving you bad news, you know that he is delivering it with kindness. We need much more of that in the legal profession.

Lorenzo is really important to me, and I will miss him terribly. I think it is important that all of us around here—who crave the lime light, who want all the attention, and who want everybody to think that we are moving mountains—know that it is the people around us who are moving the mountains. We are just lucky to be on the ride.

We will all miss you, Lorenzo. Congratulations to you and to your parents, Linda and Sergio. I know they are here today. I know how proud they are of you. We will miss you terribly, and we will be really mad at you if you don't stay in touch.

Thank you.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio.

VA MISSION BILL

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. President, I will start by congratulating Senator KLOBUCHAR, who was on the floor earlier to speak about the Congressional Accountability Act, and Senator BLUNT for their hard work to enact legislation that will make this place work better. It is a rare display of bipartisanship, coming together to improve our processes with regard to sexual harassment and other issues, and I thank them for that.

Earlier this week, some of us talked about the veterans bill that passed this Chamber—another sign of bipartisanship. It passed with a big vote, and it will help our veterans in Ohio to get the care they need, where they want it. Going into Memorial Day, I am very glad it passed.

We have heard a lot of concerns that my colleagues raised about veterans not being able to get the care they

wanted in their hometowns or the specialist they wanted or not being able to get reimbursed appropriately for care outside of the VA system, and now they will be able to do it.

Another part of that legislation that helps our veterans deals with an issue that is affecting all of the States in this body and sadly has become an epidemic in our country; that is, the opioid epidemic. It is an issue that some of our veterans are facing when they come back from service. Some have PTSD. Some have traumatic brain injuries and other injuries that require procedures. In response to the acute pain and some of these other conditions, they are given opioid medication. As a result, sadly, a number of our veterans have become addicted to opioids.

This legislation will help by, No. 1, cutting back on the overprescribing of opioids but also by using nonaddictive pain alternatives—medicines that do not have opioids in them—and other forms of therapy to help them deal with pain. These therapies will now be used more in our VA hospital system. That is a good thing for our veterans.

OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. President, talking about the opioid issue, sadly, this is gripping my State of Ohio in a way that has caused us to have more deaths by opioids than any other cause of death. But it is not just Ohio; it is an epidemic because now, nationally, it is the No. 1 cause of accidental death, and for Americans under 50, it is the No. 1 cause of death, period. This makes it the worst drug epidemic we have faced in this country—the worst since, we will recall, back in the 1980s and 1990s when we were very concerned about cocaine and other drugs. This has become the worst drug epidemic we have ever faced.

We had a tele-townhall meeting this week where I called several thousand Ohioans. We had about 20,000 people on the call at any one time. During that call, we had a survey question. Among other questions, it asked about opioids, and it asked a very simple question: Do you know someone who has been personally affected? Have you been or do you know someone who has been personally affected by this opioid epidemic? The numbers were shocking this week. Typically, over half of the callers say yes. That is how bad it is in Ohio. This week, it was 66 percent—two-thirds of the callers. Thousands of people in Ohio reported back from a tele-townhall. So it is not a self-selected group; it is people who have called in to talk about various issues, and 66 percent said they know someone who has been directly affected by this opioid addiction issue.

It has unfolded in three waves. The first wave was really prescription drugs, and this was back in the late 1990s and into the 2000s. There were pill mills in Southern Ohio and other

States. Kentucky and West Virginia were hit hard. This was medication that was being abused, in many cases leading to an addiction.

The second wave was the heroin wave. This was when heroine became more readily available and was actually less expensive than prescription drugs, and many people turned to heroin. That heroin led to many more overdoses and other issues, including diseases associated with the use of needles, hepatitis C and others.

Now there is a new wave, and the new wave, sadly, is even more deadly than the first two. It is what is called synthetic opioids or synthetic heroin. The one that you have probably heard of is called fentanyl, sometimes carfentanyl, which is even more powerful. It is truly at epidemic levels in my State, and it is being made worse by this new wave of synthetic heroin.

There are other drugs, as well, that are affecting us in our country. In my own State, in some regions of Ohio, crystal meth now coming up from Mexico is creating a bigger problem. Cocaine is certainly an issue. But as I have looked at the statistics and traveled the State, it is clear that our No. 1 issue is opioids and that synthetic opioids—50 times more potent than heroin—are the new face of the opioid epidemic.

Fentanyl was involved in about 37 percent of the deaths in Ohio as recently as 2015. By 2016, it was responsible for 58 percent of the overdose deaths. So it has gone from 37 percent to 58 percent in 1 year. We don't have all the numbers yet for 2017, but unfortunately the numbers we do have from various regions of the State indicate that 2017 is going to be just as bad, if not worse. Columbus, OH, as an example, has seen a staggering increase in opioid overdoses due to fentanyl. Two-thirds of the county's 2017 overdose deaths were due to fentanyl—two-thirds.

I am told by law enforcement that fentanyl—again, this drug that is so deadly that a few flakes of it can kill you—has also been sprinkled into other drugs. I have talked to recovering addicts who told me their stories about finding out that they were actually taking fentanyl when they thought they were taking another drug. It has been sprinkled into other street drugs, according to law enforcement and some of these recovering addicts I have talked to, including cocaine, even including marijuana, and including heroin.

Just last week, two men in the Toledo area were arrested for drug conspiracy with the intent to distribute. A little more than half a pound of fentanyl was seized upon their arrest. Half a pound of fentanyl would be equivalent to about 1 cup of fentanyl—small enough to fit into a ziplock bag in your kitchen. Yet that one drug seizure of 1 cup was enough fentanyl, according to experts, to kill 16,000 people. Remember, just a few flecks of it can

kill you. That is more than half of the population of Toledo, where this arrest took place. That is how dangerous these drugs are.

Fentanyl comes mostly from laboratories in China, and mostly it is shipped to the United States through a Federal agency; this is, the U.S. Postal Service. It is unbelievable to me that we are not doing more to push back on this given that it is actually a government entity through which the experts say most of this fentanyl is coming in, primarily from one country, primarily through the post office.

We looked into this in an 18-month investigation in the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which I chair. Our investigators revealed just how easy it is to purchase fentanyl online and have it shipped to the United States. The drugs can be found through a simple Google search, and overseas sellers essentially guarantee delivery if the fentanyl is sent through the U.S. Postal Service.

I have spent time talking to Postal Service employees about this, including back home in Ohio, and they don't want to be any part of this. No. 1, it is very dangerous. You can imagine, if these packages leak—I talked earlier about the dangers of fentanyl—people can be subjected to it, exposed to it, overdose themselves, even die. Also, they don't want to be any part of it because they don't want to see these poisons coming into our country—that they are delivering—and going to an empty warehouse or a post office box or even being delivered to someone's home, and during our investigation, we found all three. We found in several instances that people had received fentanyl through the mail and then had died of overdoses. We would have tracked that from hearing who had died and being able to track some of the payments and shipments. So there is no question that people are receiving fentanyl at their homes and taking it and dying. No one wants to be a part of that.

Why is the post office the preferred way for these drugs to come? Why do the traffickers say: If you send it through the post office, then delivery is guaranteed. It is really pretty simple. The U.S. Postal Service is exempt from a Federal law that was passed post-9/11. In 2002, Congress passed a law that required the private carriers—think FedEx or DHL or UPS—to get advance electronic data from their customers, which would then be provided to law enforcement, and it would tell law enforcement where the package is from, what is in the package, and where it is going. With that information, using big data analytics, Customs and Border Protection has been able to identify suspicious packages because they have this data on the packages coming in—every package, 100 percent of the packages. They then are able to pull these packages off line, test them, and not have this poison come into our communities.

The same is not true, unfortunately, with regard to the U.S. Postal Service. Until we began this congressional investigation and began to push the Postal Service, there was very little electronic data being provided on any packages from the Postal Service. Now, remember, there are 900 million packages coming in a year. How can law enforcement possibly find the suspect packages without having this data and without having good detection equipment to be able to find it? It is like finding a needle in a haystack. But with this information, they are able to be much more effective, as they have been with these private carriers—DHL, UPS, FedEx, and so on.

Under pressure from Congress, over the last year or so, the Postal Service has been getting some data on international packages. Last year, they received data on about 36 percent of their packages, based on the testimony they have given us, meaning that the United States received about 318 million packages without any of the screening, without any of this data on it at all. So 36 percent is an improvement, but still the vast majority of packages are not being stopped.

By the way, 20 percent of the packages that were identified by law enforcement as being problematic based on the amount of electronic data that was provided—20 percent of those packages were not presented to law enforcement, based on the testimony we received.

Finally, we learned that even though 36 percent of the packages had some sort of data, much of that data was not useful. It was not decipherable, not helpful for law enforcement.

So we have a long way to go, and we have a crisis in front of us. It is time for Congress to act because it is clear to me that the Postal Service needs this congressional mandate to more expeditiously close this loophole that is allowing this deadly poison to continue coming into our homes and onto our streets.

Again, this is the No. 1 killer in my home State of Ohio, and when we look nationally, this is the new face of the opioid epidemic. There is legislation to deal with this. It is called the STOP Act. It is a bipartisan bill I introduced with Senator AMY KLOBUCHAR. She spoke on the floor earlier. We talked earlier about getting this legislation passed. This legislation will close the loophole. It will insist that our international mail screening take place, and it will stop some of this deadly fentanyl from coming into our communities. It will simply hold the Postal Service to the same standard as private mail carriers and require that within 1 year, they get electronic data on all packages entering the United States. It is fair, it is commonsense, and it is going to make a big difference in our communities.

By the way, that is why about one-third of the Senate and about half of the House of Representatives have al-

ready signed on as cosponsors of our legislation. It is bipartisan. It is bicameral. The President's Opioid Commission—we remember that President Trump asked a bunch of experts to come together, led by Governor Chris Christie, to have a commission look at this opioid issue and come up with recommendations. One of the recommendations: Pass the STOP Act. Keep some of this fentanyl out of our country.

Last week, the House Ways and Means Committee took up our legislation, and I appreciate their doing that. Sadly, what they reported out was a weaker version of the STOP Act than is necessary to address this problem.

Their version gives the Postal Service, as an example, 4 years to implement these changes at a time when this is a crisis. Remember, it is increasing every year, to the point of being the No. 1 cause of death in my State and in many other States.

It also only requires them to get data on 95 percent of packages—not 100 percent—eventually.

It also gives the Federal Government the ability to waive the requirement altogether if it is “in the national security interest of the United States.” I hate to see them use that waiver. How could it possibly be in the national security interest of the United States of America not to have information to give to law enforcement to stop something this deadly from coming into our country? That makes no sense. I know from what I have seen and heard in Ohio that we need this and we need it now. We need this data on all foreign packages. That is in our national security interest, not setting lower screening standards or creating a loophole to evade accountability.

I am encouraged that the Ways and Means Committee chairman, KEVIN BRADY, has acknowledged these concerns. By the way, having spoken to him, I know he has a passion for addressing this issue.

I know he is personally committed to coming up with legislation that works. We need to resolve these differences, get this legislation to the floor of the House and the Senate, and get it passed so that we can begin to stop the fentanyl flooding into our country. It is at the forefront of the epidemic that we see around the country. It is taking lives. It is sidelining workers.

The No. 1 cause of crime in my State is related to opioids. Often, the criminal acts committed—such as burglary, shoplifting, and fraud—are to pay for the habit. It is crippling communities. It is breaking families apart. It is doing so at an alarming rate.

This morning, we had testimony in the Committee on Finance regarding rural healthcare, and some of the providers were talking about the fentanyl crisis. I asked them what they are doing about it and how it is going, particularly with regard to kids who were born with what is called neonatal abstinence syndrome, meaning they were

born to an addicted mother, and they have to be taken through withdrawal as a baby. These little babies you could hold in the palm of your hand are having to go through withdrawal.

They told me that the foster care systems in their States are overwhelmed; mine is, in Ohio. We have more kids under State supervision and in foster care than ever. We can't find foster families fast enough because so many of the parents are unable to take care of the kids. There are more grandparents and great-grandparents than ever having to step forward and take care of these kids. It is affecting our communities in so many ways.

The STOP Act alone isn't going to solve all of these problems. We get that. We have passed legislation around here in the last year and a half to increase prevention and education and to increase treatment and longer term recovery. That is very important, and we need to do more of it. We have new legislation to take that to the next level.

But combating this crisis at its source by making it harder for drugs to enter our country is certainly a step we can, and should, take. It is only common sense. At the very least, it would reduce supply and help to drive up the cost of this drug. One of our problems is that the drug is powerful, but it is also relatively inexpensive.

We have an opportunity with the STOP Act to make a real difference for families in every single State represented in this Chamber. If you are not already a cosponsor, I hope you will join us in this effort. If you are a cosponsor and you support this, I hope you will talk to your leadership, both sides of the aisle.

Let's get this to the floor. Let's get a vote. Let's ensure we are doing everything we possibly can to stop this poison.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CASSIDY). The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 542.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Robert Earl Wier, of Kentucky, to be United States District Judge for the Eastern District of Kentucky.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I send a cloture motion to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Robert Earl Wier, of Kentucky, to be United States District Judge for the Eastern District of Kentucky.

Mitch McConnell, John Hoeven, John Kennedy, Johnny Isakson, Jerry Moran, Cory Gardner, John Cornyn, Thom Tillis, James E. Risch, Pat Roberts, David Perdue, Mike Rounds, John Thune, Roy Blunt, Richard Burr, Tom Cotton, Jeff Flake.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 587.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Fernando Rodriguez, Jr., of Texas, to be United States District Judge for the Southern District of Texas.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I send a cloture motion to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Fernando Rodriguez, Jr., of Texas, to be United States District Judge for the Southern District of Texas.

Mitch McConnell, Tom Cotton, Roger F. Wicker, John Cornyn, Thom Tillis, Orrin G. Hatch, Roy Blunt, Mike Rounds, John Hoeven, Richard Burr, John Thune, Joni Ernst, Pat Roberts, John Barrasso, Johnny Isakson, Steve Daines, Chuck Grassley.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 625.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Annemarie Carney Axon, of Alabama, to be United States District Judge for the Northern District of Alabama.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I send a cloture motion to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Annemarie Carney Axon, of Alabama, to be United States District Judge for the Northern District of Alabama.

Mitch McConnell, Thom Tillis, John Cornyn, John Kennedy, Richard Burr, Mike Lee, David Perdue, Steve Daines, James Lankford, Pat Roberts, Johnny Isakson, Jeff Flake, Lindsey Graham, Patrick J. Toomey, Marco Rubio, Tom Cotton, James E. Risch.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the mandatory quorum calls for the cloture motions be waived.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. MCCONNELL. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SULLIVAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

VA MISSION BILL AND MEMORIAL DAY

Mr. SULLIVAN. Mr. President, a lot of our colleagues have been coming down to the floor today and had come down yesterday to talk about two things that are actually very connected. The first is the VA MISSION bill, which we just passed, that is going to significantly transform how we treat our veterans and how we make sure our vets are getting the care they have earned and deserve. Also, appropriately, as that bill has just passed the Senate and is heading to the President's desk, we are talking about Memorial Day and the Memorial Day