

As Prepared for Delivery

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Thank you Chancellor Jordan for the invitation to speak at your Signature Series, and thank you Dr. Majidi for your friendship and for your kind introduction.

I am proud to contribute to the tradition Chancellor Jordan has established of bringing speakers to campus: a place where students, faculty, and members of the Aiken community can come together to discuss issues impacting the campus, the country, and the world.

There is a lot of interest in the topic of drugs these days – both on college campuses, and in communities throughout the nation. There are many good reasons for this: while some are readily apparent, others might not be so obvious. I'd like to talk a little about both today, and what DEA is doing to address these challenges.

Life expectancy of the average American has gone up every year for the past century: however, for the most recent two years that we have data for, it has decreased. One major reason is a dramatic increase in drug overdoses: More than 70,000 in 2017. That's higher than it has ever been, and quadruple what it was 20 years ago, with synthetic opioid overdoses up 45 percent between 2016 and 2017. Fill up this auditorium twice a week, every week, and that's how many Americans died in 2017 from drugs.

It's shocking that today more Americans die from unintentional drug overdoses than from firearms, motor vehicle crashes, or homicides. We're on a college campus, so it's particularly relevant that for Americans under 50 today, you're more likely to die from drugs than from any other cause.

These deaths don't happen in isolation, nor are they the only way drugs devastate the lives of individuals, communities, and countries.

It seems self-evident that when drugs kill, they've done tremendous damage, especially when they cut short the lives of young people: however, we can't stop analyzing the costs of drugs and drug trafficking there. We can't because those deaths have a ripple effect on society. We can't because we must also consider what happens to those addicted who *don't* die: they represent the vast majority of people directly harmed by drug use. For example, while nearly 48,000 Americans died from opioids in 2017, 2.1 million suffered with an opioid use disorder.

Their lives – and those who love them – are turned upside down. In 2015, 86,000 children in the United States entered foster care due to parental drug use. The communities where they live, including here in Aiken, in Columbia...as well as in places as far away as the country of Colombia, and so many places in between, are devastated, both by drugs, and by those who traffic in them.

The economic toll to our nation – in increased healthcare costs; reduced productivity and competitiveness; in recovery, and rehabilitation...as well as increased criminal justice costs total hundreds of billions of dollars a year. It stops us from achieving the important goals we share with our

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fellow Americans: living healthier, more productive, and longer lives; increasing our safety and security; and growing our educational attainment, professional achievement, and intellectual fulfillment. By some estimates, the economic cost of the opioid crisis alone equals as much as 2.8 percent of GDP annually. To put this in perspective, GDP growth in 2017 was estimated at 2.3 percent.

Drugs however also fuel illicit and illegal activities that you might not think are related to drug trafficking. I hope you will consider the enormous secondary effects of drug trafficking and use, and the critical role that DEA plays as you think about these issues.

For example, did you know that most Mexican trafficking organizations also engage in other illegal activities? These include human trafficking, money laundering, extortion, and even things such as smuggling billions of dollars of oil. While we don't know if the death of at least 91 Mexicans in a pipeline explosion last month was connected to the cartels, it is an activity they're deeply engaged in. It's a reminder that the only goal of these criminal organizations is profit, no matter what the costs are to others.

As you know the President has spoken a great deal about borders. Mexican transnational criminal organizations violate the sovereignty of our nation every day – from the south, from the north, by land, by sea, and by air, moving drugs into our country.

They remain the greatest criminal drug threat to the United States, and they are active throughout the Americas, including in the Southeast, with tentacles reaching right here into Aiken County.

A recent operation that DEA was involved in in Aiken is a good example of the reach of Mexican drug trafficking organizations into this area.

A methamphetamine trafficking organization active in this region for years had Aiken as a major distribution point. All told, they sold hundreds of kilos of crystal meth and about 50 kilos of heroin each year in the Carolinas and Georgia. That is, they supplied thousands of users in this area with hundreds of thousands of hits of meth and heroin every year.

Our intelligence and the evidence gathered indicated this organization arranged shipments from other states to Aiken, as well as directly from a major drug trafficking cartel in Mexico. This cartel, and their distributors, engaged in violence, supported gangs, and spread addiction throughout this region.

To date, DEA and our partners arrested 13 members of this drug trafficking organization, and seized kilo quantities of heroin and crystal meth.

Perhaps just as importantly, we've connected the dots to their sources of supply, to other distribution routes, and to facilitators, such as money launderers.

This is who DEA targets, and this is how we root them out.

In addition to drugs and borders, the President is also talking about immigration, particularly from Central America. A principal reason why many come to the United States is because they are seeking to escape the corruption, instability, and violence caused by traffickers there. Reducing the threat of

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gangs like MS-13, which originated in El Salvador, and of the drug cartels, has been a concern of previous Administrations: however, for President Trump, this has become a top priority, as it rightfully should be.

Drug trafficking is as much an international problem as a domestic threat: according to the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, 31 million people worldwide suffer from drug use disorders, and 450,000 died from them in 2015. This is a reason why DEA is the most global of federal law enforcement organizations, with more than 300 offices around the world. Traffickers don't respect borders, and drugs can eat away at you regardless of where you are from, or what your background is. It does not matter whether you're rich or poor, young or old, or what your passport says: it's an equal opportunity destroyer.

Synthetic drugs such as fentanyl are a principal driver for the dramatic increase in deaths from drugs in the United States. This includes a more than 100 percent increase in synthetic opioid-related deaths in North Carolina last year, while here in South Carolina, nearly 1,400 deaths were attributable to opioids in 2016 and 2017. Like Fentanyl, nearly all the heroin, cocaine, and meth found in the United States comes from abroad via international trafficking organizations.

This means that today those who produce and distribute these drugs are spreading addiction, violence, and instability with little regard to borders.

Consider Venezuela, which you've probably read quite a lot about in the news lately. Many in the Maduro government have been heavily involved in drug trafficking: it's one reason why their government has been able to stay afloat. It is also one of the reasons why it is one of the most corrupt in the world.

DEA has taken a lead in exposing the connection between Maduro's cronies and drug trafficking. For example, we conducted an investigation that led to the conviction of Maduro's nephews who attempted to import a ton of cocaine into our country; we also investigated the Director General of the Venezuelan anti-drug agency, and as a result he was indicted for trafficking drugs to the United States.

We also played an instrumental role in the indictment and designation of Maduro's Vice President as a drug kingpin. His day of reckoning on drug charges will be coming soon, and when it does, it will be due to the hard work of the men and women of DEA.

While this cocaine trafficking may seem like it impacts principally the people of Venezuela, it does not. Their government's corruption has led to one of the largest migrations of people in the modern history of the Western Hemisphere. It has also played a major role in the movement of a "tsunami of cocaine." This is having an impact worldwide, and DEA is assisting our partners in Europe and elsewhere who are seizing record amounts of cocaine, much of it connected to Venezuela.

We're experiencing this wave of cocaine here in the U.S., too. You may think that you'd never try cocaine, but the fact is that in 2017 more than 800,000 Americans under the age of 25 used it for the first time. Unfortunately, more than 10,000 Americans died using cocaine, more than twice as many as four years earlier.

We're seeing the effects of increased drug availability and use elsewhere in society too.

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For example, the largest workplace drug testing company in America reports a significant jump in positive cocaine tests; skyrocketing numbers of positive methamphetamine tests in Southern states; and the highest overall percentage of positive drug tests in a decade.

You may have also read about the trial of Joaquin Guzman in New York. The charges and testimony laid bare the extraordinarily violent and extremely corrosive effect of drug trafficking on governments and on individuals. DEA has been deeply involved in investigating him, his associates, and the Sinaloa Cartel, and we played a critical role in his arrest and extradition.

How do you bring sustained, good governance and respect for the rule of law in Mexico without addressing the violence and corruption of the drug cartels? How do you cut off the oxygen to people like Maduro if they continue to generate billions of dollars by trafficking in drugs? How do you reduce the flow of immigrants from Central America without going after those responsible for instability and violence there? How do you make our own country a healthier place, and make our own economy more productive?

Government officials can't govern effectively when they are forced to make choices out of fear. Fearful of the knock on the door where they're given a choice between the silver or the lead. That is the choice: take a bribe from drug traffickers, or take a bullet. This may sound like something out of "Narcos," but it is the stone-cold reality that public officials and others far too often have to make in countries where transnational criminal organizations flourish.

Places like these are not places where democracy can take root, whether it is in Latin America, in Southwest Asia, or West Africa – or where prosperity and opportunity can grow in our own country, in places like Baltimore City, rural West Virginia, or in San Juan, Puerto Rico. What these places have in common is that they're all threatened by the drug trade. They're also all places where DEA, working with our federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement partners are fighting some of the most dangerous criminals in the world, and creating organizations that can fight back.

Perhaps this is what you imagine we do at DEA, and you'd be right: we disrupt, dismantle, and destroy drug trafficking organizations. However, many people think we use our approximately two billion dollar budget to target users whose lives are controlled by the drugs they use, who are seeking their next fix. Or that we decide which drugs are legal and which ones aren't. Or that we set sentencing guidelines. None of this is true.

What we do is we enforce the nation's federal drug laws. Those are set by Congress: and while we have an important role in scheduling drugs, it is done based on science, and in collaboration with other government agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration.

We work closely with, and ultimately share the same goals as our allies and partners in the prevention and recovery communities. We believe that part of stopping drug abuse before it starts requires reducing the supply of those drugs.

This is done through effective interdiction and enforcement. To me it's common sense: the more we reduce access to drugs, the fewer drugs there are to be abused, and fewer people who will use them.

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Doing this isn't just wise policy: it's compassionate. It's measurable, and it's an effective, efficient investment of resources, one in keeping with our American values.

It is also common sense that the prevention, enforcement, and recovery communities complement and support one another: we will all rise or fall together. This is a deeply held belief at DEA, and it is reflected in the Administration's National Drug Strategy, which was released last week.

That is why I believe that while we should show compassion to victims of drug addiction, traffickers should expect to be arrested and charged with the most serious and readily provable offenses they are responsible for.

This is particularly true for those whose heroin or fentanyl can be traced to overdose deaths. Focusing on those traffickers and charging and prosecuting them is a top priority of the Department of Justice and DEA.

This is what we do at DEA. Last year DEA seized in both foreign and domestic operations over a half million pounds of methamphetamine; 55,000 pounds of heroin; 1.7 million pounds of cocaine; and more than enough fentanyl to kill every man, woman, and child in the United States.

DEA also provides oversight for Controlled Prescription Drugs, which include prescription opioids, which are a major gateway for those who later become dependent on them, or use heroin and fentanyl. You don't hear a lot about this, but it is a big part of what we do. Last year there were more than 1.7 million DEA registrants, including every doctor, nurse practitioner, and pharmacist in the country who either prescribes or dispenses these drugs.

Today there are more than 9,000 people working at DEA, an organization with a mission that is truly like no other. What we do is based on science, and the law. My background is in the law, and I have seen DEA agents, intelligence analysts, forensic chemists, and diversion investigators and their outstanding work in courtrooms and in the investigations they conduct.

They are the best of the best, and they deeply believe in our mission, and so do I.

I understand you have a criminal justice concentration, as well as chemistry and laboratory science departments here at USCA. I would like to invite those interested in having a real impact on the lives of people across the country and around the world to consider opportunities at DEA. We rely on Americans from all walks of life to build cases and careers at DEA, and to assist our partners in confronting these complex, interconnected challenges: challenges that we as a nation must address.

Our mission is both noble and important, and it is an organization that I'm extremely proud to lead. I truly believe that when we reduce drug crime, we reduce all crime, especially violent crime...and when we reduce substance abuse, we make our nation and our communities better places. I hope you understand that a little bit better, and see the connection between drug trafficking and so many of the other challenges our country and the world face today.

I appreciate the opportunity to join you tonight, and to tell all of you why our work at DEA is so important. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions. ###