



1 June 2015

The Honorable Joe Pitts  
United States House of Representatives  
Energy & Commerce Committee  
Chairman, Health Subcommittee  
420 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Gene Green  
United States House of Representatives  
Energy & Commerce Committee  
Ranking Member, Health Subcommittee  
2470 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Support for H.R.953, the “Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2015”

Dear Chairman Pitts and Ranking Member Green:

On behalf of the National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable (NVHR), a national coalition of over 250 organizations working to fight, and ultimately end, the hepatitis B and C epidemics, we are writing to express our support for H.R.953 – the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2015 – introduced by Representatives Sensenbrenner, Ryan of Ohio, Duckworth, Chabot, Marino, Scott of Virginia, and Joyce. H.R.953 outlines a broad strategy to address the opioid and heroin abuse crisis in our communities. This bill can also serve a vital role in stemming the tide of a resurgent hepatitis C epidemic.

Hepatitis C is a communicable, chronic, life-threatening virus affecting approximately 3.2 million Americans. Often asymptomatic, the virus can take decades to eventually manifest as cirrhosis, end-stage liver disease, and liver cancer – all very costly for the healthcare system. Despite updated U.S. Preventive Services Task Force testing recommendations and the availability of effective curative treatment, up to 75% of those living with hepatitis C do not know their status. In the United States, injection drug use poses the highest risk for infection, and there is a close connection between the opioid crisis and the significant rise in hepatitis C infection.

Localized outbreaks – like those occurring in recent months Indiana and Kentucky – reflect a national emergent epidemic. From 2010-2013, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) saw a 151% increase in incidence of hepatitis C. Those affected are primarily young (under 30 years of age) and living in rural or suburban areas, with men and women experiencing similar rates of infection. CDC reports that cases are overwhelmingly preceded by misuse of oral prescription opioids followed by initiation of injection, with many individuals eventually switching to heroin, a less expensive but equally effective alternative. Alarming, these youth often become infected with hepatitis C within two years of transitioning to injecting.

Consequently, NVHR would like to highlight for members aspects of H.R.953 most complimentary to our work fighting the hepatitis C epidemic:

- **Expanded prevention and awareness** – Increased health education for youth, young adults, and parents is particularly important to preventing the misuse and abuse of prescription opioids and heroin that may quickly lead to hepatitis C infection among those under 30.
- **Expanded access to medication assisted therapy (MAT)** – A recent Scottish study showed that high coverage of MAT, along with sterile syringe access, effectively reduces hepatitis C incidence. This is an important step toward that goal, with MAT playing a critical role in reducing and/or eliminating injecting behavior. Expanded MAT access in criminal justice settings is particularly crucial, as the incarcerated population is also heavily impacted by hepatitis C.



- **Expanded educational opportunities** – Education level is a well-established determinant of health status, which includes but extends far beyond hepatitis C. NVHR welcomes the expansion of educational opportunities within criminal justice settings, as well as a revision of the FAFSA form to eliminate disqualification based on drug possession or sale convictions, as communities highly impacted by incarceration and drug-related convictions are also disproportionately affected by hepatitis C.
- **Alternatives to incarceration** – As stated above, communities with high incarceration rates also suffer disproportionately from hepatitis C. This is especially true for Vietnam-era veterans, who experience high rates of hepatitis C and would benefit from specialized “veterans’ treatment courts” outlined by the bill. Incarceration can also affect eligibility for public housing – a fundamental support for low income individuals at risk for or living with hepatitis C and their families.
- **“Building Communities of Recovery”** – Such communities may include efforts to reduce stigma associated with substance use disorders – a significant barrier to testing for those at risk, and care for those living with hepatitis C – as well as public education and outreach regarding the medical consequences of substance use disorders, including hepatitis C.
- **Incentivizing comprehensive state-based responses** – In addition to supporting many of the activities listed above, state demonstration grants may also support the much-needed development, implementation, and expansion of programs to conduct hepatitis C screening, as well as linkage to care, within addiction treatment settings.

To truly impact any complex health issue, such as addiction or communicable disease, it is necessary to have a comprehensive and coordinated approach such as that outlined by the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2015. The prevention of misuse and abuse of prescription opioids and heroin is an important component of hepatitis C prevention as well.

NVHR thanks you for your leadership, and urges all Members of the House of Representatives to support H.R.953, the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2015. We also urge all Committees of jurisdiction to hold a markup of this bill with the urgency this crisis merits.

If you have any questions, or would like additional information about hepatitis C, please do not hesitate to contact Christine Rodriguez at the email or number below.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ryan Clary".

Ryan Clary  
Executive Director

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christine Rodriguez".

Christine Rodriguez  
Public Policy Manager  
[crodriguez@nvhr.org](mailto:crodriguez@nvhr.org)  
(202) 408-4848, x221

cc: House of Representatives Energy & Commerce Health Subcommittee Members  
House of Representatives Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, Homeland Security, and Investigations Members  
House of Representatives Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training Members  
House of Representatives Co-Sponsors of H.R.953