

Congress OKs opioid legislation in show of bipartisanship

October 4 2018, by Adam Beam

Setting aside the Supreme Court fight, members of Congress this week approved bipartisan legislation aimed at curbing the devastating opioid addiction across the country.

But the Support for Patients and Communities Act, which President Donald Trump said he would sign into law, has political implications. It includes contributions from at least 70 lawmakers, some of whom face tough re-election campaigns in November. The measure, which the Senate passed 98-1 on Wednesday and the House approved 393-8 on Sept. 28, ensures incumbents have something positive to campaign about in the final weeks before the election.

Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, represents one of the states hardest hit by [opioid addiction](#) and was a main driver of the bill in the Senate.

"To the millions of people in communities across this country who have been crippled by this crisis, this legislation is the turning point," Portman said, adding, "It's a glimmer of hope at the end of a dark tunnel."

More than 63,600 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2016. Two-thirds of them involved a prescription or illegal opioid, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The measure attacks the problem in hundreds of ways. It would require the U.S. Postal Service to track international packages and test them for drugs. It would especially target China, who officials say is the United

States' primary source of the deadly [synthetic opioid fentanyl](#). It would allow physicians assistants and nurse practitioners to prescribe addiction treatment medication.

And it would make changes to the country's largest health coverage programs: Medicaid and Medicare.

In 13 states, people 65 and older account for the highest rate of opioid-related inpatient stays. But Medicare, which covers people 65 and older, does not pay for opioid treatment programs. The bill would allow Medicare coverage for medications, counseling and testing for opioid treatment.

Medicaid, which covers the poor and the disabled, pays for [substance abuse treatment](#). But Medicaid does not pay for anyone arrested and held in jail. The bill would require states to restore coverage for juveniles once they're released.

The bill also focuses on helping people once after they've gone through addiction treatment. A handful of states each would be eligible to receive \$30 million grants to pay for job training for recovering addicts. And it would offer \$25 million in grants divided among five eligible states for housing for addicts who have completed treatment programs and have nowhere to go.

"It's hard for people to be successful in recovery if they can't find work," said Van Ingram, executive director of Kentucky's Office of Drug Control Policy.

The bill would send that grant money to states that have been the hardest hit by [opioid](#) addiction, among them, Kentucky, home of U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Republican Rep. Andy Barr. They were among the sponsors of the grants provision.

Although McConnell is not up for re-election in November, Barr, is seeking a fourth term in one of the most competitive House races in the country. He faces Democrat Amy McGrath, a retired Marine fighter pilot who also has made addressing the [opioid crisis](#) part of her campaign.

"We've been working on this a lot longer than this campaign season," Barr said. "It's an example of us getting results."

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