USDA Chief Begins National Tour Targeting Rural Opioid Addiction

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This week, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack paid a personal visit to the Tennessee-Virginia border to discuss “creative solutions” to help fight the region’s growing opioid epidemic. The town hall meeting was the first of several talks on drug abuse the USDA chief plans to make across the country, The Tennessean reports.

Earlier this year, President Obama specially tasked Vilsack to lead an interagency team on heroin and prescription painkiller addiction in the United States and to help push Congress to direct an additional $1.1 billion toward increasing access toward substance abuse treatment over the next two years. At the meeting, Vilsack also spoke briefly about dealing with his mother’s drug and alcohol addiction issues when he was a child, driving home his personal attachment to the cause.

Vilsack cited recent reports by the Tennessee Association of Mental Health Organizations that found that only 4 percent of adults in the Appalachian region who needed addiction treatment in 2014 received services. However, if Congress passes the White House’s initiative, Tennessee alone could receive up to $24 million over the next two years to help improve those numbers.

At the meeting, Vilsack asked both states’ governors what they would do with the additional money. Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam said he’d put it toward treatment and counseling. Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe said he’d use the funds to create more drug courts in the state, which would refer people to addiction treatment rather than prison when convicted for a drug-related crime. McAuliffe also talked about new Virginia laws that will put naloxone, an injection that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose, into the hands of first responders.

Medicaid expansion, universal nalaxone access, better monitoring of prescriptions and increased supportive housing for people in recovery are some of the USDA panel’s major goals for the region. Vilsack also announced nearly $1.4 million in grant money to fund five new telemedicine projects in Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia to help provide mental health support and substance abuse treatment on a much broader scale.

The hour-long discussion was followed by input from government and nonprofit agency panelists, who completed comment cards with additional ideas on how to address the region’s opioid epidemic.

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