



Notes from the Chief

What I'm working on for You

Osiyo -

When the U.S. Surgeon General visited Oklahoma last year, he declared the “prescription opioid epidemic that is sweeping across the U.S. has hit Indian Country particularly hard.” This is absolutely felt in the Cherokee Nation, where opioid-related overdoses have more than doubled in recent years and more Cherokee Nation citizens suffer from opioid addiction.

This epidemic has affected every aspect of our society: our economy, our hospitals, our schools and our homes. Our children are especially threatened by the epidemic, putting the future of the Cherokee Nation at risk.

When I was elected Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, I made a commitment to protect the health and welfare of our nearly 350,000 citizens about half of whom live inside our tribal boundaries in northeast Oklahoma. We are made up of many communities and we feel the impacts of the opioid epidemic every day, as we watch our friends and loved ones grapple with the consequences of addiction. I take this epidemic seriously and that’s why we have taken proactive measures to fight it. To curb abuse at the point of care, our doctors and hospitals implemented a prescription monitoring program. Long before it was required, our health care system also adopted technologies to stop illegal distribution of opioids.

Despite our best efforts, the crisis is still ravaging our communities. This is a matter of life and death, which is why we are doing everything in our power to prevent bad actors from flooding the Cherokee Nation with prescription opioids.

Large distributors and retailers like McKesson Corporation, Cardinal Health, Inc.,

AmerisourceBergen, CVS Health, Walgreens Boots Alliance, Inc., and Walmart Stores, Inc., have fueled this epidemic by saturating our communities with these highly-addictive painkillers, ignoring warning signs that these drugs are not landing in the right hands. This epidemic has cost Cherokee Nation health services millions of dollars, not to mention the thousands of lives lost and ruined. That's dollars we could use for our schools, college scholarships, hospitals, roads or housing. I will not allow Cherokee Nation citizens to suffer while these companies make huge profits at our expense.

No one has felt the impact of the opioid crisis more than our children. For children born into families struggling with opioid addiction, their lives are a tragic cycle of abuse and neglect. A recent study found pregnant Native American women are up to 8.7 times more likely to be opioid dependent. This means more Cherokee babies born with lifelong physical, mental and emotional deficiencies. Many babies are hospitalized for weeks and some are immediately transferred to Tulsa-area hospitals to receive life-saving care. Sadly, these infants are then immediately placed in our foster system. Cherokee families are torn apart before they ever have a chance to be whole, and our entire tribe suffers as a result.

The drug distributors and retailers have avoided their duty as a "check" on the system by failing to monitor, report and prevent illegal opioid activity. Enough is enough. This epidemic is ripping apart families, straining our tribal resources and wreaking havoc across the Cherokee Nation. We'll ensure distributors and corporate pharmacies are held accountable for their negligence and greed. My hope is that this case will bring justice to our nation and serve as an example to other communities fighting the opioid epidemic.

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