

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 10, 2018

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We are writing to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) evaluate the relationships between labor force participation rates of prime-age and older workers and substance use disorders, as well as linkages with state and federal policies.

Our nation's labor force participation rate has declined significantly since peaking in the late 1990s. A number of factors have contributed to this phenomenon, including the aging of America's labor force and declines in labor force participation rates of "prime-age" workers (ages 25 to 54 years old). In a December 2017 report, the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging confirmed that labor force participation rates have increased among older Americans and declined for prime-age workers.¹ Among workers aged 65 and older, labor force participation has increased from 12.2 percent in 1997 to 19.3 percent in 2017, which is a 58.2 percent increase. Meanwhile, among prime-age workers during this same period, labor force participation rates have declined from 84.1 percent to 81.7 percent, which is a 2.9 percent decrease. The decline is even more pronounced among men, whose participation rates fell from 91.8 percent to 88.6 percent during this period, a 3.5 percent decrease.

Substance use disorders appear to be one factor that has affected labor force participation rates. The number of overdose deaths in the United States involving prescription opioids and heroin has quintupled since 1999, and every day 115 Americans lose their battle with opioid use. In 2016, more than 63,600 people died from drug overdoses, including 42,000 of these lives taken by opioids, making this the leading cause of injury-related death in the United States. In addition, a 2017 working paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research found a significant correlation between opioid use and unemployment rates on a county level.

As the opioid crisis devastates communities around the country and millions of Americans continue to find it difficult to return to the labor force, we request a report that explores in depth the relationship between substance use and labor force participation rates, and any state and federal programs that may impact these trends. Specifically, we would like the GAO to examine the following questions:

¹ See Senate Special Committee on Aging, *America's Aging Workforce: Opportunities and Challenges*, 6, (Dec. 2017), found at, <https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Aging%20Workforce%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>.

- 1) What are the trends in prime-age and older adults' labor force participation, in general and stratified by geography, socioeconomic status, demographics, and education?
- 2) What are the trends in substance use disorders, and specifically opioid use, in general, and stratified by geography, socioeconomic status, and demographics, and education?
- 3) What is the relationship between substance use disorders, and specifically opioid use, and prime-age and older adults' labor force participation across the nation and in each state? How does this relationship differ by factors such as geography, socioeconomic status, education, sex, and race? What factors may account for observed differences?
- 4) What are stakeholders' and experts' views on how certain state and federal health care and income support programs assist individuals in recovery from substance use disorders?
- 5) What challenges do individuals in recovery from substance use disorders have in maintaining employment and returning to the labor force, and what federal resources are available to support these individuals?
- 6) What are stakeholders' and experts' views about the impact of trends in substance use disorders and labor force participation?

Thank you for your assistance with this request. If you have any questions, please contact Sarah Khasawinah with Senator Collins at 202-224-5364, Keith Miller with Senator Casey at 202-224-0185, or Joe McNally with Senator Donnelly at 202-224-4814.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Joe Donnelly
United States Senator