

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4804

COMMITTEES  
APPROPRIATIONS  
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
INTELLIGENCE  
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

September 26, 2017

Mr. David S. Wichmann  
Chief Executive Officer  
UnitedHealth Group  
PO Box 1459  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55440

Dear Mr. Wichmann:

Prescription opioid abuse has destroyed communities throughout the United States and has been particularly devastating to my state of West Virginia. As the senior Senator from West Virginia, I have seen firsthand the social and economic damage that it has caused and heard from countless families in my state who have lost loved ones. We lost 33,000 Americans to opioid overdoses in 2015 alone, and in 2016, we lost more than 700 West Virginians.

That is why I was so disappointed to see the article "Amid Opioid Crisis, Insurers Restrict Pricey, Less Addictive Painkillers" in the New York Times on September 17<sup>th</sup>. This article highlighted the fact that, despite the deadly epidemic, insurance companies were more likely to cover inexpensive, common opioid pain relievers than safer, though more expensive, alternatives. It also noted that while it is generally easy to get an opioid medication covered, patients are required to jump through hoops to receive alternative pain management treatment like physical therapy, and it is much easier for them to get an opioid than to access opioid addiction treatment.

It is clear that the overprescribing of opioid medications is a primary cause of this crisis and that the lack of access to treatment is perpetuating it. It is time now for every person in the medical field to take responsibility and take action to reduce unnecessary opioid prescriptions. The practices detailed in the article are the exact opposite of what we need and will only serve to worsen the opioid epidemic, putting more people at risk of opioid addiction and overdose death.

While you have taken steps to address this crisis, I urge you to immediately strengthen your policies by taking concrete actions to ensure that patients have access to non-opioid pain management alternatives and to the treatment that they need. Specifically, I ask you to reduce or eliminate the barriers that your beneficiaries face to access non-opioid pain medications and physical therapy for pain management. Just as importantly, I urge you to ensure that every beneficiary that you serve that needs substance use disorder treatment, including behavioral health counseling, is able to affordably access it.

I ask that you provide me with details about your plan to take these steps to protect your beneficiaries, stop the opioid epidemic, and save lives.

We have lost too many Americans to the opioid epidemic. I hope that your company will be a part of the solution.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe Manchin III", written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above the printed name and title.

Joe Manchin III  
United States Senator