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## We can make it less profitable to traffic opioids – Editorial by John Cassara and Nathan Proctor

*Posted on Thursday, November 2, 2017 at 12:39 pm*



The president will now declare what many of us experience first hand, the opioid epidemic is a national emergency.

Frankly, with as many as [59,000 deaths](#) in 2016, there doesn't seem to be any other possible description.

So many dedicated people in cities and towns, faith communities and schools, families and hospitals are fighting to save lives and help people escape addiction.

But there are also a lot of people working to keep illegal opioids on the streets.

With [2.6 million opioid addicts](#) in the United States, the scale of drug-running operations is immense, as are the profits. It's not a mystery why the cartels build these operations, they do it for the money — and there is a lot of money to be had.

The Office of National Drug Control policy estimates that of the [\\$65 billion spent on illegal drugs each year](#), [about \\$1 billion](#), or 1.5 percent, is seized by all federal agencies combined. That means some 98.5 percent of the profits from trafficking remain in the hands of the cartels and other narco traffickers.

We can and must stop that free flow of money, which, besides flooding our communities with cheap heroin, helps strengthen these criminal enterprises.

As the bipartisan [Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control wrote in 2013](#): "[W]e have become convinced that we cannot stop the drug trade without first cutting off the money that flows to drug trafficking organizations."

There are simple steps we can take now that go after that money. For starters, we must get rid of anonymous shell companies — companies formed with no way of knowing who owns or controls them (known as the "beneficial owner").

As documented in the report ["Anonymity Overdose,"](#) traffickers can hide and move drug proceeds through anonymous shell companies because starting such companies requires zero personal information.

One of the most dangerous chemicals associated with the opioid crisis is fentanyl — some 50 times more potent than heroin. [Deaths from fentanyl overdoses are up 540% in the last three years.](#)

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Law enforcement agents have [cataloged](#) how fentanyl is often shipped to the U.S. from China. Sometimes the drugs or drug making supplies are sent [from, and addressed to, a set of anonymous companies](#).

These companies, which are not connected to the real owner (and sometimes not even connected to a real person), can open bank accounts, transfer money, and buy real estate. Law enforcement does not have access to who is behind these entities.

Requiring all companies formed in the United States disclose their beneficial owners would enable law enforcement to more effectively follow the money trail to the top. [Bipartisan](#) legislation has been introduced in [both chambers](#) of Congress which would do just that, and we believe this is something Congress should enact as soon as possible.

As we ask ourselves what else can we do to stand against this epidemic, it's follow the money.

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*John A. Cassara is a former U.S. Treasury special agent, who spent much of his career investigating money laundering and terrorist financing. His latest book is titled "Trade-Based Money Laundering: The Next Frontier in International Money Laundering Enforcement."*

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