

Opening Statement of Senator Rob Portman
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security
& Governmental Affairs

“GAO’s 2021 High Risk List: Addressing Waste, Fraud, and Abuse”
March 2, 2021

(as prepared for delivery)

Thank you, Chairman Peters. I want to thank Mr. Dodaro, and each of the experts you have with you today, for your service, and for taking the time to testify on GAO’s findings.

The subject of today’s hearing—examining federal programs identified by GAO as vulnerable to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement—directly coincides with the mission of our Committee, which aims to ensure that government programs are both cost effective, and to root out waste and misconduct in federal spending.

The GAO’s 2021 High-Risk Report—released this morning—can serve as a roadmap to maximizing the effectiveness of federal expenditures. It should be our “to-do” list.

Today’s report identifies numerous important issues. I would like to highlight a few. First, GAO added new items to the High Risk List, one of which is National Efforts to Prevent, Respond to, and Recover from Drug Misuse.

I’m glad GAO has recognized drug misuse as a “high-risk” issue. Illicit drugs, and the misuse of prescription drugs, have devastated the lives of many Ohioans and families around the country. Addressing this issue has long been a priority of mine.

Last December, I introduced bipartisan legislation with Senators Whitehouse and Klobuchar, the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act 2.0 of 2020, or CARA 2.0 which builds on the success of the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act which became law in 2016. CARA 2.0 provides much needed

federal resources for evidence-based education, treatment, and recovery programs for those struggling with substance abuse and addiction. And over the last six years, I've worked through my chairmanship of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations to identify some of the root causes of our addiction crisis and implement targeted solutions, like enacting the STOP Act, which will help stop drugs from being shipped from other countries through our Postal Service.

We were making some headway before the pandemic, but I'm sad to say, we've seen a negative impact due to the economic and social effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. GAO has identified that as a serious problem, writing in the report that "the largest recorded increase of drug overdose deaths occurred during the 12-month period ending in May 2020," end of quote. During that 12-month period, we saw more than 81,000 overdose deaths. To make matters worse, many of the federal agencies responsible for addressing drug misuse are currently focused on the COVID-19 pandemic—as they should be, of course, but that takes away resources from the drug addiction epidemic.

I am eager to hear from GAO on how this Committee and federal agencies can ensure progress is made on implementing their recommendations to address this issue.

GAO also has identified cybersecurity as one of the five high risk areas found to have regressed since GAO issued its March 2019 High Risk List. GAO attributes this regression to a leadership gap in federal cybersecurity coordination. This tracks with the results of my bipartisan PSI report from June 2019 that documents the failure of eight federal agencies, over the course of two administrations, to address vulnerabilities in their IT infrastructure, leaving Americans' sensitive and personal information unsafe and vulnerable to theft.

The lack of a central authority to coordinate the implementation of our nation's cybersecurity strategy couldn't come at a worse time. I would emphasize that although Congress authorized the establishment of a National Cyber Director in the Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, the position has yet to be filled. I look forward to working with the administration to ensure this new position effectively coordinates cybersecurity efforts across the federal government.

Recently, we learned of a highly sophisticated cyberattack that compromised the networks of numerous federal agencies, local and state governments and private sector businesses. The SolarWinds hack should be a wakeup call for all federal agencies, Congress and the executive branch. We owe it to the American people to ensure our federal networks are secure. This begins by implementing GAO's recommendations.

Finally, today's report's highlights a number of high risk areas this Committee has prioritized, and will continue to prioritize as we progress through the 117th Congress. These areas include the enforcement of tax laws, managing federal real property, improving federal oversight of food safety, and U.S. Postal Service's financial viability.

GAO's work related to these high risk areas provides this Committee with a checklist of urgent priorities to address while carrying out our responsibility as the Senate's chief oversight body. I look forward to working with GAO and federal agencies to actually start the process of addressing these problems.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and thank you again to our witnesses for being here today. I look forward to our discussion.