

Opening Statement
Nomination Hearing for Dr. Tim Westlake, M.D., FACEP
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
Chairman Bill Cassidy, M.D.
September 16th, 2026

Good morning, Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Sanders, and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Receiving President Trump's nomination to serve as the Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use at the Department of Health and Human Services is the honor of my lifetime. If confirmed to lead the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration or SAMHSA, I would be humbled by the opportunity to work to ensure every American struggling with mental illness or addiction has a path to effective treatment, lasting recovery, and a meaningful life.

For more than 27 years, I have practiced emergency medicine, where I've treated people in their most vulnerable moments and have borne witness to incomprehensible suffering. So many of those moments have stayed with me. I remember the countless family members who brought their loved ones to the emergency department during a mental health crisis because they didn't know where else to turn. I remember the families watching a loved one cycle between treatment, jail, and homelessness. I remember the patients I revived from an overdose, only to see them relapse immediately after discharge. And I especially remember the families of those we could not save; the anguish left behind by overdose, suicide, and the devastating collateral damage of untreated substance abuse and mental illness.

I have also had the privilege of serving Wisconsin and our country through policy reform efforts addressing the prescription opioid and fentanyl crisis. That work has given me the distinct honor of collaborating with leaders committed to confronting this devastating public health challenge. I want to especially thank Chairman Cassidy for his leadership on the HALT Fentanyl Act last year to permanently schedule fentanyl substances under the Controlled Substances Act. I also want to thank Senator Baldwin, from my home state of Wisconsin, for her leadership on Title IX of the Comprehensive Addiction Recovery Act in 2016. Both represent important legislative efforts in the fight against opioid abuse, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to contribute to this critical work.

My commitment to this work is not only professional. I'm also a person living in recovery for 29 years. That lived experience has shaped the physician, policymaker, husband, father, and person I am today. It has taught me that behavioral health cannot be reduced to science or policy alone.

Science matters. Evidence matters. But so do compassion, faith, family, human connection, and the belief that people can heal.

Far too many Americans across the country share these mental health and addiction challenges, are stuck trying to navigate broken systems, and are not receiving the care they need to get well and build a life in recovery. These people deserve a champion in their corner who believes in the human spirit and ability to heal. Who understands the importance of faith and connection in building a meaningful life. And who will lead with the experience that recovery is not an abstract policy objective. I believe that person is me.

If confirmed, I will work with states, tribes, and territories to build a system that works and is based on a continuum of care where people are supported the moment they ask for help, throughout treatment, and onto recovery. No gaps in care. No starting over. No one left to navigate complex systems alone.

We will get back to the fundamentals of good medicine; combining science and compassion and connecting Americans to health care that works. We should leave no stone unturned in pursuing effective treatment while recognizing the powerful roles that families, faith, purpose, and community can play in recovery to move away from a pill culture to a purpose culture.

I want to build a culture where recovery is not merely possible but expected. Where the chronic disease of mental illness and addiction will be understood and treated with the same diligence as other deadly if untreated chronic diseases. Where the principles of recovery and connection grow to extend beyond the healthcare system and into our workplaces and communities.

I believe it is SAMHSA's responsibility to listen to states, communities, and tribal nations and to help make available the resources, evidence, tools, and support available to achieve these goals.

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to medicine and there is not one system that will work for every community. But there are standards we can create and models of care we can offer and barriers we can break down to address these complex problems and restore our country's behavioral health.

If confirmed, I hope to work with this Committee to become partners who bring hope and healing to the American people. I firmly believe my life's work, my faith in God, and my family have brought me before you today, and I will be deeply honored and humbled to receive your support to lead this agency. I look forward to answering your questions.