

Massachusetts Lawmakers Working on Opioid Abuse Bill

A Massachusetts House bill aimed at curbing the opioid abuse crisis in the state would limit certain painkiller prescriptions and set an evaluation requirement for overdose victims who seek help at hospital emergency rooms.

House lawmakers released their version of the bill Monday that includes several provisions but doesn't go as far as legislation offered by Gov. Charlie Baker. The Senate has already passed a version of the bill.

All three versions are aimed at addressing the frightening rise in opioid-related overdose deaths and abuse. Massachusetts recorded 1,089 such deaths in 2014, a 63 percent increase over 2012.

Baker said after a Monday meeting with House Speaker Robert DeLeo and Senate President Stan Rosenberg that he's anxious to sign legislation soon.

"This is not a pride of authorship issue. This is one where I think all of us are anxious to see something happen," the governor said. "Four people a day are dying in Massachusetts of opioid overdoses and the more we can do to move quickly on our shared agenda on this, the better we're all going to be."

The House bill would limit initial opiate painkiller prescriptions to a seven-day supply and would require an in-depth evaluation be made by a licensed medical professional to anyone who shows up in an emergency room with an opiate-related overdose.

It also would require that anyone admitted to a hospital who is reasonably believed by the attending physician to be experiencing an opiate-related overdose receive the substance abuse evaluation within 24 hours.

The evaluation must include a diagnosis of the patient's substance use disorder. The bill would bar hospitals from releasing a patient within 24 hours without first completing the evaluation.

The governor's proposal would limit initial opiate painkiller prescriptions to three days and would allow doctors to commit a person involuntarily to a drug treatment facility for up to 72 hours if they're considered an immediate danger to themselves or others.

There are some areas where the House agrees with Baker.

The House bill seeks to end a longstanding policy of placing women with civil commitments for substance abuse - but who have not committed crimes - into the state prison for women in Framingham. Baker also opposes the policy.

The House bill also includes legal protections for anyone administering the overdose-reversing drug naloxone - also known as Narcan - to a person during an opiate overdose and requires a doctor to check the Prescription Monitoring Program every time a patient is prescribed a high-risk opiate medication.

The bill must win the backing of several legislative committees before heading to the full House for debate.

"It is my desire that we can have this on the floor and debated during the month of January," DeLeo told reporters at the Statehouse after the meeting with the governor and Rosenberg.

Rosenberg said he expects the House and Senate versions of the bill to go to a conference committee to hammer out a single compromise bill to send to Baker.

By: NECN