

Warren, Clark offer bill to allow partial-fill opioid prescriptions

WASHINGTON – Sen. Elizabeth Warren and Rep. Katherine Clark are introducing legislation Wednesday to allow pharmacists to partially fill opioid prescriptions.

The two Massachusetts Democrats say the measure would help reduce the number of unused pain killers that too often end up in the wrong hands. More than 70 percent of adults who misuse prescription opioids get them from friends or relatives, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

"Millions of half-filled bottles of unused prescription drugs line our families' medicine cabinets, and too often, that is where opioid addiction begins," Clark said in a statement.

The Reducing Unused Medications Act of 2016 would allow prescriptions for opioid medications to be partially filled by pharmacists at the request of patients or doctors. The remainder of the prescription could be filled but not beyond the date that the original prescription would have expired. Warren is introducing the bill with Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, a Republican from West Virginia. Clark is introducing the bill in the House with Rep. Steve Stivers, a Republican from Ohio.

The legislation aims to resolve any ambiguity in federal law and clear the way for states considering partial fill policies to act. The Massachusetts State Senate has considered legislation that would allow patients to request a partial fill for opioid prescriptions with a proportionate reduction in their co-pay.

Warren said the bill “gets the federal government out of the way and empowers states like Massachusetts to pursue additional prescribing policies that are the right local responses to this terrible crisis.”

The heroin and opioid crisis has become a hot topic in Congress. The Senate Judiciary Committee recently approved a multi-faceted bill aimed at addressing the issue. Senate floor debate on the legislation could come as early as next week.

This week, Sen. Edward Markey, D-Mass., has pushed the need for action on the opioid crisis as the Senate considered the nomination of Robert Califf for commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration. Markey has also said that he plans to offer several amendments to the Judiciary-approved bill when it reaches the Senate floor.

Markey wants to expand the bill to require medical students to pass a course in pain management, increase access to medications used to treat heroin addiction, and establishing a “Good Samaritan” provision to protect individuals who deliver the anti-overdose drug naloxone to those suffering a potentially fatal over dose.

The White House has also been pressing for Congressional action on a \$1.1 billion budget proposal that would mostly go to states to increase access to drug treatment services. The issue was also front and center at the National Governors Association’s winter meeting, where Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker was a leading voice on tackling the opioid epidemic.

By Peter Urban