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Florida Finally Passes Prescription Drug Tracking System

NOPE Task Force and other groups rallied legislators to create a statewide tracking database to reduce prescription drug abuse. The law took seven years to pass.

By Leon Fooksman

Unlike other states, it took Florida seven years to pass a prescription drug monitoring law intended to curb the growing abuse of painkiller and anti-anxiety medications.



Bruce Grant, director of Florida Office of Drug Control, credited organizations like Narcotic Overdose Prevention & Education (NOPE) Task Force for pressuring legislators this year into creating a statewide database to track prescriptions and sales of pharmaceuticals.

More than 35 other states already have prescription drug monitoring systems to enable doctors and pharmacists to review a patient's history before writing or filling a prescription -- a practice aimed at reducing doctor shopping and attempts to fill prescriptions at multiple pharmacies. Florida's tracking will begin in December 2010.

"This is long overdue," Grant said. "The help we received in passing the law from grass-roots groups -- and NOPE was an important part of it -- made a big difference."

Last year, close to 3,000 people died in Florida from prescription drug overdoses, nearly three times the deaths attributable to illegal drugs, according to state figures.

Across the country, abuse of prescription drugs has risen dramatically over the past two decades, along with an increase in the number of controlled-substance prescriptions being written.

In 2007, U.S. pharmacies dispensed nearly 180 million prescriptions for opiates such as oxycodone and hydrocodone, a sharp spike from about 40 million in 1991, according to The Wall Street Journal, citing congressional testimony from National Institute on Drug Abuse.

The reasons for Florida becoming a hotbed for pills abuse are attributed to a rise in: youths raiding their families' medicine cabinets; those with chronic pain taking too many painkillers; people addicted to drugs who doctor shop to get new prescriptions for their next high. And: a late start in establishing its own prescription monitoring system.

Florida was the largest among the remaining states without such a database, making it a haven for drug abusers seeking medications, law enforcement officials say. Some Florida clinics, operating with little oversight, have supplied pills for drug rings in Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Ohio and other states.

"Florida's lack of a prescription drug monitoring system has made our state a target for criminals looking to buy prescription drugs easily," State Rep. Kelly Skidmore, one of the legislation's chief sponsors, said

in a written statement to the Miami Herald last year. "I am pleased that we are now equipping physicians and law enforcement personnel with the tools they need."

For its part, NOPE put into action a network of concerned parents, law enforcement administrators and drug prevention leaders to call legislators and advocates and demand for the passage of the drug monitoring system, said Karen Perry, NOPE's executive director.

The legislation passed nearly unanimously and was signed by Gov. Charlie Crist in June. Previous efforts to pass the bill failed over concerns that it would threaten patient privacy.

Bill Janes, former director of Florida Office of Drug Control, said NOPE and other groups helped convince legislators of the importance to pass the law.

"NOPE's parents went to legislators and told them they lost sons and daughters and that this law could prevent more deaths," Janes said.

The new system won't by itself resolve the prescription drug abuse epidemic, Perry said.

Ongoing drug education initiatives in schools, colleges, community centers and workplaces are essential to reducing overdoses attributed to powerful prescription drugs, she said. NOPE puts on presentations to students and their parents to make them aware of the dangers of using illegal drugs and mixing prescription pills.

Before the tracking system starts in December, Grant said he intends for the Legislature to add a requirement into the law mandating that doctors are trained to recognize signs of drug dependence.

"We took the first big step in passing this law. It recognizes that there's a problem here," Grant said.

If you value NOPE Task Force's commitment to preventing drug overdoses, please consider a voluntary payment to support the organization. Donate at www.nopetaskforce.org/donations.asp

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