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Democrat Aronberg will wage Republican Bondi's pill-mill fight as Fla. drug czar

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Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi said Thursday that she is unleashing an assault on pill mills with the aid of federal, state and local prosecutors, state agencies and victims to shut down pain management clinics dealing drugs that law enforcement officials say are worse than crack cocaine.

Coordinating all of the efforts for Bondi, a Republican, is the state's latest drug czar -- former state Sen. Dave Aronberg, a Greenacres Democrat who lost his own bid for attorney general last year.

Bondi rolled out a legislative package that would enhance penalties for the pain clinic doctors who overprescribe drugs such as Oxycodone by charging them a \$10,000 fine and suspending their licenses for six months.

"We are the epicenter for the country in prescription drug abuse," Bondi said at a press conference, accompanied by Aronberg and more than a dozen law enforcement officials, including Northern District U.S. Attorney Pamela Marsh.

Bondi said that Gov. Rick Scott recently signed off on new rules that will make it easier for law enforcement officials and prosecutors to go after the pill mills, now spread throughout the state but proliferating in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

Before the rules can go into effect, however, they still need approval from the legislature, which begins its annual session March 8. Although lawmaker passed the pill mill regulatory last spring, they passed a law in the fall requiring them to sign off on all state agency rules that cost more than \$1 million to implement.

In the meantime, Aronberg said he intends to prosecute the clinics and physicians under different aspects of the new law that he co-sponsored last year.

Until now, only local prosecutors have gone after the pill mills, Aronberg said.

The state Department of Health currently has registered 1,167 "pill mills" but officials say the number could be much higher because they believe some clinics are masquerading as urgent care centers or even detox facilities.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement has identified 1,268 people in Florida who have died in 2010 because of prescription drug overdose, and officials estimate that at least seven Floridians die each day from prescription drug overdoses.

"We are not waiting for the new rules because this is a crisis. We can't wait to shut these places down. We have to act when we see a violation and we're going to act," Aronberg said. "The new rules will help us but we're going to act ASAP."

The new rules approved by Scott include limiting the number of prescriptions that any doctor at a registered pain management clinic can write to a maximum of 150 per day.

Part of Aronberg's focus will also be on prevention, with the aid of Tequesta resident Karen Perry, who founded Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education, or N.O.P.E., after her son died of a drug overdose in 2003.

Perry said Thursday the last words her 21-year-old son spoke to her were "I love you, Mom.

"Three nights later, I received that knock on the door at 3 o'clock in the morning," she said, from a police officer informing her and her husband that their son was dead.

They later learned he was addicted to a cocktail of drugs and had used Ritalin, Xanax, codeine, Demerol, ecstasy, cocaine and heroin.

Since her son's death, Florida has had 210,000 more "grief-stricken survivors ... still suffering like me," Perry said.

Aronberg said he relishes his new role as the state's drug czar, a post previously under the governor's office but done away with by Scott.

"I love what I'm doing. I wanted this to be my focus as attorney general. Now I get to do the same thing and it doesn't matter that I don't have the title. This has been my focus my entire career. I get to work with people who are just as motivated as I am on this issue. She has been so accommodating," Aronberg said of Bondi, who said the war on drugs "is not a partisan issue."

Palm Beach County State Attorney Michael McAuliffe, a frontrunner in the crackdown on pill mills, said he supported Bondi's reinstatement of a drug czar.

"What I don't want to have happen is the fight against pill mills and trafficking to be politicized," McAuliffe said. "If we can keep focused on law enforcement efforts on one part and on regulatory and legislative advocacy on another, we'll do fine."

Staff writer Michael Laforgia contributed to this story.