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# Proposed legislation tackles drug overdoses

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*Published: Monday, March 16, 2009 at 1:00 a.m.*

Early numbers for 2008 show overdose deaths continuing their long upward trend in Florida, with Southwest Florida remaining a drug overdose hot spot.

Now, a handful of Florida lawmakers are making another attempt to address the state's overdose problem. They have introduced legislation adopted by 38 other states to monitor the most deadly prescription drugs.

Similar efforts have failed in Florida in the past because of opposition by the medical industry, but the legislation seems to be gaining traction this year with persistent lobbying by groups like Sarasota-based Families Against Addictive Drug Abuse, whose founder, Cindy Harney, lost her son to a drug overdose in 2006.

Many Florida medical groups are supporting the legislation for the first time.

"I think it's appalling that we've let this problem get so bad," said Harney, who is working with lawmakers on the legislation.

Five drug monitoring bills have been filed for the 2009 legislative session.

Florida had 4,055 drug-related deaths in the first six months of 2008 compared with 3,980 in the first six months of 2007, according to an interim report by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

The Sarasota region has one of the highest overdose rates in Florida and that continued through the first half of 2008, with the number of deaths holding steady or increasing for most substances.

Prescription drugs — mainly Oxycontin, methadone, Xanax and other painkillers and sedatives — continue to cause the most overdose deaths in Florida, far more than illegal drugs.

And the problem appears to be worsening or holding steady for most prescription drugs, data shows.

Harney and other top anti-drug crusaders such as Gov. Charlie Crist's drug czar, Bill Janes, support a bill sponsored by Rep. Kurt Kelly, R-Ocala, and Senator Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, that would create a drug database to alert medical professionals if patients are filling multiple prescriptions and doctor shopping.

Kelly believes he has overcome many of the medical industry's objections, namely that the database would be too onerous, violate privacy laws and open the industry up to liability issues.

"I think we've done it with this legislation," Kelly said. "I think people realize we can't afford to wait any longer while more people die."

Only certain dangerous drugs — mostly painkillers and sedatives — would be included in the database. Access would be limited because of privacy concerns.

Critics also have attacked the bill's potential cost, estimated around \$6 million in past years.

Kelly has worked hard to debunk those figures, saying it would cost less than \$1 million, most of it coming from federal grants.

"Do you know the costs for rehab and jail?" Harney said. "This is cheap."

Kelly worked over the summer to gain medical groups' support. The effort appears to be paying off.

The Florida Medical Association, which withheld support in the past because of concerns over medical-record confidentiality, is behind the bill this year, said the association's government affairs director, Jeff Scott.

"This year's different," Scott said. "Our pain management physicians are expressing a lot of concerns about their ability to prevent doctor shopping and this is a tool they desperately need."

Janes said Kelly's bill has been well-received statewide.

"This is the strongest support that I've seen by far from all sectors of Florida," said Janes, who has been trying to pass a prescription monitoring bill for four years.

Complete 2008 overdose numbers will not be available until May, but preliminary data indicates that the powerful painkiller oxycodone — known commercially as Oxycontin and Percocet — is on track to eclipse cocaine as the single deadliest drug in Florida in 2008, with 423 deaths in the first six months.

Other states have seen overdose rates drop with the adoption of prescription monitoring laws.

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