

Illinois bill targets heroin overdoses

A law that could help prevent the increasing number of heroin-related overdose deaths is under consideration by Illinois legislators.

Sponsored by a group of Chicago-area state lawmakers, the initiative would create a statewide drug-overdose prevention program and increase the reporting on overdose trends. The bill – HB 497 – also expands access to Narcan, a low-cost heroin-overdose antidote.

In McHenry County, heroin-related overdose deaths tripled between 2007 and 2008 – from six to at least 16, according to coroner's records.

The proposed law would give a person who is not otherwise licensed to administer Narcan the ability to do so in emergency overdose situations after professional training. No matter the outcome, any person or health care professional involved would not be liable for medical malpractice violations or criminal prosecution.

"It's about making sure that individuals who are most likely to witness a drug overdose have access to Narcan and can administer it safely and save someone's life," said John Peller, director of government affairs with the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, an advocate of the bill.

"In a lot of cases, people who witness drug overdoses are afraid to call 9-1-1 because they're afraid of being arrested," he continued. "This allows people to respond quickly ... so the overdose victim can receive the care that they need."

Narcan is a federally approved overdose medication that reverses the effects of heroin and other opiates.

"It literally kicks heroin out of the brain so the person comes to again," Peller said, adding that it was safe and easy to inject.

With proper training, Peller said, the use of Narcan throughout the state could be helpful in sustaining an addict's life until he or she could receive substance abuse treatment.

Chris Gleason, the director for substance abuse services at the Family Service and Community Mental Health Center for McHenry County, said he thought the legislation was a good idea – to an extent.

He said several of his clients had benefited from the antidote.

"I think Narcan is a wonderful drug because it does revive people," said Gleason, who also runs the McHenry County Substance Abuse Coalition. "My concern is when we take it out of a medical establishment, then we don't have as much control."

Karen Battaglia, a trauma nurse coordinator with Centegra Hospital – McHenry, agreed. She sees overdoses on a regular basis, noting that emergency personnel typically administer Narcan after accessing the patient's airway and starting an IV.

"I'm not sure I'd be comfortable with the lay public having access to a medication like this," Battaglia said. "Since the bill is in its infancy, I'm sure there will be plenty of tweaking to it."

The legislation, proposed this month by state Rep. David Miller, D-Lynwood, is up for a committee hearing this week in Springfield. Its tentative effective date is Jan. 1, 2010.

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