

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

PATRICK SIGNS SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT BILL, SAYS FAMILIES NEED HELP

By Gintautas Dumcius
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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, AUG. 6, 2014 — A bill signed by Gov. Deval Patrick on Wednesday would provide individuals fighting addiction improved access to treatment and recovery services, advocates said.

The bill, which lawmakers sent to the governor's desk in the early morning hours of Aug. 1, requires insurers to reimburse patients for addiction treatment from licensed counselors and guarantees coverage for up to 14 days in an inpatient setting. Under the bill (S 2142), the state Department of Public Health gains new regulatory authority to work toward reducing opioid abuse and temporarily ban substances like bath salts.

"Families can't do it on their own," Patrick said during a bill signing ceremony in his newly refurbished office suite. "Clinics and hospitals can't do it on their own. Government can't do it on its own. But all of us working together, we can. And what we can do is break this scourge of addiction to narcotic painkillers and the increase in use of heroin and all of the calamity that that creates in households all over the Commonwealth."

Senate President Therese Murray (D-Plymouth) said a mother called her on Monday morning saying her 26-year-old from East Falmouth had died Friday from an overdose. "Something has to be done and we have all the tools in this bill," Murray said. "We have all the tools put together and the argument that this is going to cost too much, you have to say it's already costing us more than we should be paying. And that's not only the toll in human life, that's the absolute dissolution of families when this happens."

The Massachusetts Association of Health Plans has raised concerns about the legislation driving up health care costs. In an Aug. 1 letter to the governor asking him to amend the bill, MAHP president Lora Pellegrini acknowledged the opioid addiction crisis but said the legislation abolishes the ability of health plans to conduct medical necessity determinations that ensure treatment in the appropriate setting. "Even in crisis we should not endorse arbitrary treatment guidelines that are not evidence-based and we should not prohibit tools that work to ensure that the right care is delivered at the right time and in the right setting," she added.

Patrick pushed back about the claims when asked by a reporter. "First of all, it is evidence-based and it's based on evidence developed between a doctor and his or her patient," Patrick said, drawing applause from the crowd. "Like any big change we're going to have to work this out," he added, saying the legislation could also bring about cost savings. "But we started from the premise about how to help people heal."

Susan Servais, executive director of the Massachusetts Health Council, said the bill is necessary. The council issued a report in 2012 showing rising substance abuse problems in Worcester as well as on the South Shore, where one person died every eight days from an overdose.

"This is not a new issue," Servais said after the bill-signing. "This is something that's been building and building."

James Hunt, Jr., the president and CEO of the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, also voiced support for the bill. "It's a step toward getting people the care they need and if there is a cost associated, so be it," he said. "In the long run, this is going to save dollars and save families from being fractured."

According to the Patrick administration, the fiscal 2015 budget includes \$10 million for a substance abuse trust fund; \$1 million for an increase in access to naloxone; also known as Narcan, for reversals of overdoses; and \$500,000 for the accreditation of sober homes.

The bill-signing was also attended by a slew of lawmakers, including Sens. John Keenan (D-Quincy), Jennifer Flanagan (D-Leominster), Joan Lovely (D-Salem) and Linda Dorcea Forry (D-Dorchester), as well as Reps. Vinny deMacedo (R-Plymouth), Elizabeth Malia (D-Jamaica Plain), Denise Garlick (D-Needham), Paul Brodeur (D-Melrose), Jim O'Day (D-Worcester), Dave Rogers (D-Cambridge), and Tim Madden (D-Nantucket).

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