



Drug-treatment centers fear flood of patients as Florida's pill-mill law kicks in

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Florida Governor Rick Scott

With a new state law in place designed to root out pill-mill operations and make potent prescription drugs harder to get for dealers and addicts, Florida's drug-treatment centers are bracing for an influx of new patients and hoping they have the resources to accommodate them.

"Essentially you have a new class of drug-addicted individuals who if their supply is stopped will need at least detox capacity and most probably treatment capacity, and programs are full across the state," said Mark Fontaine, executive director of the Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association. "So it will be a challenge."

For several years, prescription-drug abuse has skyrocketed in Florida, with pain clinics, known as pill mills, dotting the state, particularly in South and Central Florida. In 2009 the Florida Department of Law Enforcement reported that nine people a day were dying of prescription-drug overdoses. And law-enforcement officers in other states such as Kentucky and Ohio complained to Florida officials that residents were road-tripping to the Sunshine State to load up on painkillers.

After much negotiation, Florida lawmakers compromised on a new law this spring that imposes criminal and administrative penalties for overprescribing narcotics, bans some doctors from dispensing narcotics and requires a new permitting process for pharmacies that sell medication such as oxycodone and other controlled substances. The new law also sets out a number of standards that individual pain clinics must meet and gives doctors seven days to report prescriptions to the state so that the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program can track patients who might be doctor-shopping to feed their addiction.

Doctors and lawmakers hope the new law, which went into effect July 1, will be tough enough to stop many people from getting the drugs, but they may also soon be faced with another problem: whether treatment clinics have enough funds and space to provide the help that many addicts need.

Todd Dixon, director of community affairs for the Center for Drug-Free Living in Orlando, which is paid for through a mix of private and public money, said there was no way the publicly

funded facilities could handle a huge spike of patients if that now happens. However, he said that since 2007, the center has slowly seen its numbers go up anyway because of the growing prescription-drug problem.

"The public system is maxed out," he said. "There isn't a lot of capacity. So we're talking about a large influx of people at one time. That system can never handle it.

The Center for Drug-Free Living is the only detoxification-treatment center in the Orlando area that serves patients ordered there by a judge. It has 40 beds to serve a four-county region.

Dr. Barbara Krantz, medical director for the Hanley Center, a private addiction and treatment center in West Palm Beach, said emergency-room doctors in her area have told her they are already seeing an uptick in the number of patients coming to the hospital with bad withdrawal symptoms and in need of detoxification because their access to drugs has been cut off by the new law.

Krantz said her facility's staff expects more and more patients to walk through its doors in the coming months.

"I'm sure we're going to see it in all phases of treatment," she said. "We're going to see it across the board."

The Florida Department of Children and Families, which funds a variety of locally based drug programs across the state, has fought to keep its substance-abuse funding intact in an era of sharp budget shortfalls. Its total annual budget for drug- and alcohol-abuse treatment has hovered around \$215 million for the past few years, but now demand may be outpacing the dollars.

"We anticipated this would happen," said state Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, R-Wellington, whose area has been particularly hard-hit by the prescription-drug problem. "We will have to pay close attention to what that increased demand is and the strain that puts on the system. But our goal is to have those folks break the cycle of addiction."

According to a DCF report, Florida was ranked 35th out of 50 states in 2009 for per-capita spending on substance-abuse and addiction programs.

State Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, who sponsored the pill-mill legislation, said the Legislature must track the ongoing fight against prescription-drug abuse to see whether dealers are finding ways around the law, but for now, his focus is on whether drug-recovery centers can provide detoxification and treatment to all who need them.

"You're going to have a big problem, not problem, but a situation where many addicts thankfully will not be able to get their fix, and we're going to need to assist those individuals in any way we can so they don't commit crimes," Fasano said.

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