Lawmakers Consider the Benefits of Meds for Withdrawal in Lockups

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Lawmakers in New York are considering a measure to make drug treatments such as methadone and Suboxone available to all prison and jail inmates who are struggling with opioid addiction. States across the country are considering similar approaches in the midst of a deadly opioid epidemic that is affecting the nation.

Research shows that the drugs, along with behavioral therapy, can help people with addiction reduce the withdrawal symptoms and cravings that cause people to relapse. In fact, federal statistics suggest that more than half of all inmates in state prisons nationwide have a substance abuse problem. According to New York officials, that percentage could be as high as 80 percent in state and local lockups, which at any given time have about 77,000 inmates.

Drug policy experts point to the success of a similar program in Rhode Island. It has seen a sharp drop in the number of former inmates who died of overdoses. It had 26 cases of opioid-related overdoses among former inmates in 2016. But last year, there were only nine. Click the link to see San Jose's top rehab placement programs.

Other jails in Louisville, Kentucky, California, and in Massachusetts have reported similar success. ?It makes no sense that people who have a public health issue don't have access to medicine,? said Jasmine Budnella, drug policy coordinator at VOCAL-NY, an advocacy group that speaks on behalf of low-income New Yorkers on such issues as criminal justice, drug policy, and homelessness. ?In the U.S., we talk about human rights but we are literally torturing these people.?

The debate over supporting medication-assisted treatment (MAT) in correctional settings has no organized opposition, and now only comes down to funding. Some counties have paid for programs in their jails, while others have not.

A total of six state and local lockups in the New York City area, for example, have limited drug-assistance programs for people addicted to opioids.

Albany County was the first county in the state outside of New York City to offer MAT. A state budget proposal from Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo would spend $3.75 million to expand access in county jails. More than $1 million will be used to expand its use in state prisons. Democratic leaders of the state Legislature have called for more. Advocates say they want to see at least $7 million in the annual budget.

A spokesman for Cuomo?s budget office, however, defended the proposed funding amount, saying that it is part of a broader ?holistic? approach to fighting opioid addiction.

?The medication-assisted treatment program is just one prong of New York State's $200 million, nation-leading fight against opioid addiction that is implementing effective solutions to save lives,? said spokesman Freeman Klopott.

A decision is expected before April 1, when the new budget is due. ?Addiction is a disease,? said New York Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal, a Manhattan Democrat who is sponsoring the drug-treatment legislation. ?We should treat it like a disease.?

These initiatives can help people like Laura Levine, who has had some brushes with the law and was booked into the Nassau County jail. Her drug withdrawal got worse as she entered prison, but she received no help from guards.

?I would rather give birth to all five of my children again without medication than go through withdrawal again,? she said. Levine is now in recovery and works to help others struggling with opioids.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of

medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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