

PROPOSED POLICY POSITION

4. COMBATTING PRESCRIPTION DRUG TRAFFICKING AND ABUSE

BACKGROUND

When taken properly, opioids, which are synthetic versions of opium and include drugs such as morphine, codeine, oxycodone and others, can help people deal with chronic pain. However, they can become addictive or be used for nonmedical means. Abusers typically crush and inhale the pills, or inject them, in order to produce a euphoric high. Oftentimes, these drugs are obtained from friends and family members, but the growing number of pain clinics that supply drug dealers and addicts with illicit prescription painkillers has contributed to the spread of prescription pain medication abuse.

A study by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found that treatment admissions for prescription pain pill abuse have quadrupled nationally in the past decade, and that this increase spans every age, gender, race, ethnicity, level of education and employment, and region of the country. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that about 20 percent of people in the United States, or 48 million, have used prescription drugs for nonmedical reasons. Even more alarming, according to a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, overdoses from prescription drugs in the United States doubled from 1999 to 2007, and each year more than 20,000 people die from overdoses, far more people than are killed by controlled substances such as cocaine and heroin. In addition, the South has one of the highest rates of overdose related to prescription drug abuse and misuse and, in many states, it has become the primary cause of accidental death. Furthermore, many Southern states have become major hubs for trafficking of prescription drugs along the “pill mill pipeline.”

National Drug Control Policy Director Gil Kerlikowske has called prescription drug abuse the nation’s “fastest-growing drug problem,” and last month he revealed a new strategy by the White House to reduce misuse of such drugs by 15 percent in five years through a nationwide education campaign; training for clinical practitioners; and establishing prescription drug monitoring programs in all 50 states (currently, only 35 states are operating such programs). In addition, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is asking makers of pain medications to assist in supplying materials that physicians can use while counseling patients on the risks and benefits of using prescription pain medications.

RECOMMENDATION

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments urges the Obama administration and the U.S. Congress to further evaluate the public health impacts that the proliferation of prescription drug abuse and trafficking have on the Southern region and the nation, and to offer assistance in collaborative efforts to combat this epidemic. Furthermore, the Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments urges Southern states to work together to develop strategies for addressing this trend, such as sharing information regarding education campaigns; creating task forces; expanding treatment assistance programs; and/or developing prescription drug electronic monitoring systems. The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments requests that a copy of this policy position be forwarded to the Southern Congressional delegation, the president of the United States, and the Department of Health and Human Services administrator.