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Bill would fund drug-addiction fight

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Despite what the pundits and polls may say about how divided Americans are after the recent elections, one issue can unite us: how to improve access to treatment for those addicted to drugs and alcohol. A bill before Congress could go a long ways towards accomplishing just that.

The Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act would invest substantial funds in addiction services at both the community level and within the criminal justice system. It would fund the development of comprehensive treatment initiatives that specifically incorporate one of the most underutilized proven strategies to improve access to treatment: Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT).

MAT is the use of medications in the treatment of addictions, which in combination with counseling and behavioral therapies provides a “whole-patient” approach. It utilizes medications to normalize brain chemistry, block the euphoric effects of opioids, relieve physiological cravings and normalize body functions. Studies have shown that MAT reduces drug use, disease rates, and criminal activity among those addicted to opiates.

There’s no question about the pervasive nature of the problem. More than 20 million Americans are living with an untreated addiction. Drug overdoses are the leading cause of accidental death in this country. And deaths due to opioid pain relievers – more than 36,000 annually – now exceed those from all illegal drugs.

Addiction is an equal opportunity illness. In one way or another, every community has been impacted by addiction. And every one of us pays for cost of untreated addictions. In one year alone, the financial costs of addiction were estimated at more than \$55 billion due to lost productivity at work, health care fees and expenses associated with the criminal justice system.

MAT is a proven but tragically underutilized tool in helping people enter and sustain recovery. But despite the promise MAT offers in improving lives, there are many obstacles to its greater use.

Public and private insurance often unnecessarily restrict coverage of, and access to, medications. Many health, social services, and criminal justice systems lack the resources and medical knowledge to recommend and administer MAT effectively. While some understand the value of MAT and utilize it, many still do not understand its value or even have harmful stereotypes that do not comport with proven medical evidence.

Within the criminal justice system, an estimated 65 percent of the 2.4 million people currently in prison are clinically addicted to drugs or alcohol, yet only 11 percent receive any professional treatment while incarcerated. They leave the criminal justice system no better off than when they arrived, and few are connected with treatment when they return to their communities.

Until these barriers are removed, our nation will continue to face a public health epidemic of untreated addiction and a growing opioid crisis, with millions of Americans still lacking access to effective treatment options. We can and must do better.

The Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act legislation includes provisions for the training of health and justice providers in the use of MAT and expanding the availability of the lifesaving opioid-reversal medication naloxone for law enforcement, as well as treatment alternatives to incarceration programs. The bill particularly calls for the criminal justice system to expand resources to identify and treat incarcerated individuals suffering from addiction disorders by providing evidence-based treatment.

If passed, this would be a major step towards breaking the cycle of addiction and incarceration that plagues our nation.

By expanding access to addiction treatment, especially the use of MAT, policymakers can make a difference in the lives and well-being of all Americans. That is something we can all agree on.

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