

For Immediate Release

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Illinois General Assembly Passes Overdose Prevention and Harm Reduction Act

Bipartisan vote of 106-11 demonstrates strong support for overdose prevention and proven public health interventions that address the worst impacts of the opioid epidemic

Springfield, IL—With support from across the political spectrum, the Illinois House has approved **the Overdose Prevention and Harm Reduction Act**, a critical measure needed to address the most devastating impacts of the opioid epidemic. Already the worst public health crisis of this generation, the opioid crisis has led to over 70,000 annual deaths nationwide, with Illinois experiencing almost 3,000 annual overdose deaths and the fastest rate of increase in overdose mortality in Midwest. Supporters look forward to the Governor signing the bill into law this summer.

This legislation, sponsored by State Senator Melinda Bush (D-31), State Representative Deb Conroy (D-46), and supported by Heartland Alliance, Live4Lali, the Chicago Recovery Alliance, and other community advocates, seeks to reduce the worst harms of the opioid epidemic by legalizing needle exchange programs and promoting effective overdose prevention programs across the state. “As overdose deaths tragically continue to rise, we must do more to combat the opioid epidemic,” said Senator Bush. “The initiatives in the Overdose Prevention and Harm Reduction Act build on successful programs we have seen in Lake County and can make a real difference and save lives.”

A primary element of the bill is legalizing needle exchange programs statewide. “By joining 22 other states in authorizing needle exchange programs,” said Dan Rabbitt, health policy leader at Heartland Alliance, “Illinois will support a proven public health intervention **that reduces the spread of blood borne illnesses like HIV, connects individuals to services, and prevents accidental overdose death**. These services are desperately needed, particularly in suburban and rural areas that have historically had no access to community-based harm reduction programs.” The bill creates the Syringe Access Program, providing communities clarity on how to start a needle exchange program and expanding access to these important public health interventions.

The bill also supports effective overdose prevention programming by directing the state to provide additional support to existing programs. The state has registered hundreds of overdose prevention programs but has not provided significant direction in the best methods of distributing naloxone (a safe and effective overdose reversal medication). “Naloxone is an effective medication that can save the lives of our neighbors struggling with opioid addiction,” said Representative Conroy, “but only if we get it into the hands of the right people.” Under this act, the state will do more to lift up effective interventions such as street outreach and the use of peer recovery specialists and help reverse the increase in overdose deaths.

Today represents a response to the opioid epidemic that is rooted in the evidence of what works. The Overdose Prevention and Harm Reduction Act will save the lives of Illinoisans struggling with opioid addiction and allow them a path to recovery. More must be done to truly halt and reverse this public health emergency, but this bill takes a strong step in the right direction.

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Heartland Alliance for Human Rights and Human Needs is one of the Midwest’s leading antipoverty organizations, works in communities in the U.S. and abroad to serve those who are homeless, living in poverty, or seeking safety. It provides a comprehensive array of services in the areas of health, housing, jobs and justice – and leads state and national policy efforts, which target lasting change for individuals and society. Visit www.heartlandalliance.org for more.