

Vermont

Summary of State Efforts to Curb Opiate Abuse

Vermont is launching a series of initiatives designed to prevent addiction. Preventing the spread of addiction is key to addressing the problem of prescription drug abuse. This is a tough challenge—one without a clear national model or consensus around best practices. **On June 16, Governor Shumlin hosted a statewide community forum** to help share creative practices for improving prevention at all levels. Other prevention-focused initiatives include:

- Enhancing the early childhood system and improving access to high-quality pre-K programs;
- Spreading awareness to every high school across the state through the screening of Bess O’Brien’s documentary on addiction, *“Hungry Heart”*; and
- Training health care providers on identifying and treating early signs of addiction and offering emotional support to recovering addicts.

Other items that Governor Shumlin has worked on regionally include:

- Working with other states to help them implement Naloxone training programs (NarCan)
- Ensuring the safe prescription of Zohyrdo
- Working with the Canadian Ambassador to urge Canada to require abuse deterrent formulas for prescription drugs

On June 17, Governor Shumlin signed a drug package passed by the VT legislature this session with the following components:

Vermont is working to increase access to treatment by eliminating waiting lists for treatment centers. A lack of capacity and the rising demand for services is forcing hundreds of Vermonters to wait for treatment. To address this problem, the state legislature passed an appropriation from the general fund to help treatment centers add personnel and eliminate existing waitlists. Additional funding is also available for statewide recovery centers and substance abuse and mental health treatment services for Reach Up recipients (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families beneficiaries). One of the challenges associated with this approach is the reality that treatment facilities are not always embraced by local communities. Moreover, addiction is a complex disease that cannot be effectively addressed through maintenance therapies alone.

Vermont is working on an early intervention model designed to increase access to pre-trial services and keep individuals with substance use disorders out of detention. Although research shows that addicts are most accepting of treatment right after arrest, Vermont’s criminal justice system is not well-equipped to seize these opportunities for effective intervention. Under this bill, a third-party team contracted through the state and selected in conjunction with local prosecutors, defense counsel and court personnel will conduct evidence-based assessments of defendants promptly after arrest. State’s attorneys in every county will be authorized to establish a rapid intervention program, paid for by the state, whereby individuals with substance use disorders accused of drug-related crimes can agree to seek immediate treatment and avoid criminal prosecution if they adhere to a treatment program. This initiative also ensures that, for offenders who remain in the traditional criminal justice system, bail and conditions of release are informed by the results of evidence-based assessments.

Vermont is working to enhance punishment for certain drug-related offenses. Due to the state’s proximity to Boston, New York, Philadelphia and other cities where illegal drugs are relatively inexpensive, dealers can increase their margins doing business in Vermont. This bill strengthens penalties for individuals caught transporting illegal drugs into Vermont. It also stiffens penalties for people who commit armed home robbery in order to feed their drug habits.