

Clinton drug czar touts treatment, methadone clinics to lawmakers

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CHARLESTON -- Retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey, the Clinton-era drug czar, urged West Virginia lawmakers Thursday to embrace methadone clinics and similar approaches to battling OxyContin addiction and other abuse.

"A methadone program, properly administered and supervised, in and of itself can get many people addicted ... to maintain sobriety," McCaffrey told a joint meeting of the House judiciary and health and human resources committees.

But McCaffrey and the chief executive of clinic operator CRC Health Group, which has a methadone clinic in Huntington, encountered skeptical legislators. Several cited their ongoing efforts to regulate CRC's seven West Virginia clinics. They also questioned the company's for-profit approach and McCaffrey's ties to CRC while decrying a spate of methadone-related deaths.

Delegate Jeff Eldridge, D-Lincoln, cited the 45 overdose deaths reported in Logan County in the past two years. The county is part of his district, and Eldridge linked 39 of those deaths to methadone that patients took home from clinics.

"My plea to you, since you are a profit organization, is to please, please do more to educate our people, do more of one-on-one therapy, do more for the families of West Virginia, before more of our people die," Eldridge told McCaffrey and CRC CEO Barry Karlin.

"Your comments are dead on target," McCaffrey replied. "You simply cannot depend on one approach for dealing with the chaos that has engulfed some of these lives."

Huntington City Council tabled a resolution to close the Huntington Treatment Center last May as part of a compromise between the methadone clinic, located in the 100 block of 4th Avenue, and council. Instead, a community task force was formed to address the concerns of neighboring residents and business owners. Complaints against the center included that the clinic's patients parked on other businesses' lots, littered excessively and brought crime to the area.

McCaffrey has estimated that 142,000 West Virginians are addicted to drugs or alcohol. He advised a comprehensive approach that involves law enforcement, corrections, social services and other public agencies.

But McCaffrey is also a compensated member of CRC's board of directors, and repeatedly touted the company and its 145 facilities in 30 states. He defended CRC's for-profit status, and took exception to questions about his motivations.

"There's an odious implication," he said. "Because it's basically saying, 'Would you be here if you weren't being paid?' Of course I would."

Herald-Dispatch reporter Laura Wilcox and Associated Press Staff Writer Tom Breen contributed to this report.