

Weak Laws Make State A 'Pill Mill'

(Tampa Tribune (FL) Via Acquire Media NewsEdge) Mar. 22--TALLAHASSEE -- State Sen. Dave Aronberg said he felt embarrassed when Kentucky's lieutenant governor called, urging him to help stop the flow of prescription narcotics out of Florida.

Unlike Kentucky and 37 other states, Florida has no statewide tracking system for habit-forming prescription drugs. Police say organized criminal gangs are exploiting that systemic weakness, "doctor shopping" for multiple prescriptions and then selling the pills in states where they are harder to obtain.

"To me it's an embarrassment and a tragedy because Florida has become the 'pill mill' for the rest of the country," said Aronberg, a Democrat from Greenacres in Palm Beach County.

Aronberg sponsored a bill several years ago to set up a pharmaceutical tracking system, but the legislation died in the state House.

This year, Aronberg and eight other lawmakers are sponsoring bills to monitor prescription drugs. State Sen. Mike Fasano, a New Port Richey Republican with a drug-monitoring bill pending this session, said he thinks it will pass because of a growing sense of outrage among the public and law enforcement.

"Last year more people died in Florida of legal drugs than illegal drugs," Fasano said. "When you get to a point like that, something has to be done." Police and health authorities have watched with alarm as legal pharmaceuticals have supplanted cocaine and heroin as the most-abused drugs. An interim report last year by the state medical examiners found that 73 percent of the drugs found in people who died of drug-related deaths from January through June were prescription pharmaceuticals.

During that same period, the painkiller oxycodone, sold as OxyContin, killed more people (423) than any other drug. The second-highest killing drug group was benzodiazepines, which includes prescription sedatives such as Xanax, Centrax and Valium.

Florida's lack of monitoring has created a profitable export business for organized gangs in the state, police say. Gangs use runners who "doctor shop" for prescriptions, then fill them at multiple pharmacies. Couriers often transport as many as 3,000 pills to states with monitoring systems like Kentucky.

The profits are enormous. Runners pay as little as 77 cents for a 30 milligram Roxicodone pill, a painkiller known as Roxys on the street. The same pill can be sold in Tennessee or Kentucky for \$30, said Tampa police Detective Jim Menendez.

Eighty milligram Roxys cost from \$12 to \$14 a pill in a Florida pharmacy, Menendez said, but are sold for \$80 to \$100 in another state.

"It's an epidemic because of the dollars that can be made off these pills," Menendez said.

Fasano and Aronberg said they are addressing privacy concerns that ultimately killed similar bills in the House.

Florida drug czar Bill Janes said he thinks the legislation has its best chance this year.

The main opposition is from House members with privacy or security concerns. Janes said he has called officials in Kentucky and other states with tracking systems to see whether the concerns are real.

"I am aware of no breaches in security," he said.

Reporter Mike Salinero can be reached at (813) 259-8303.